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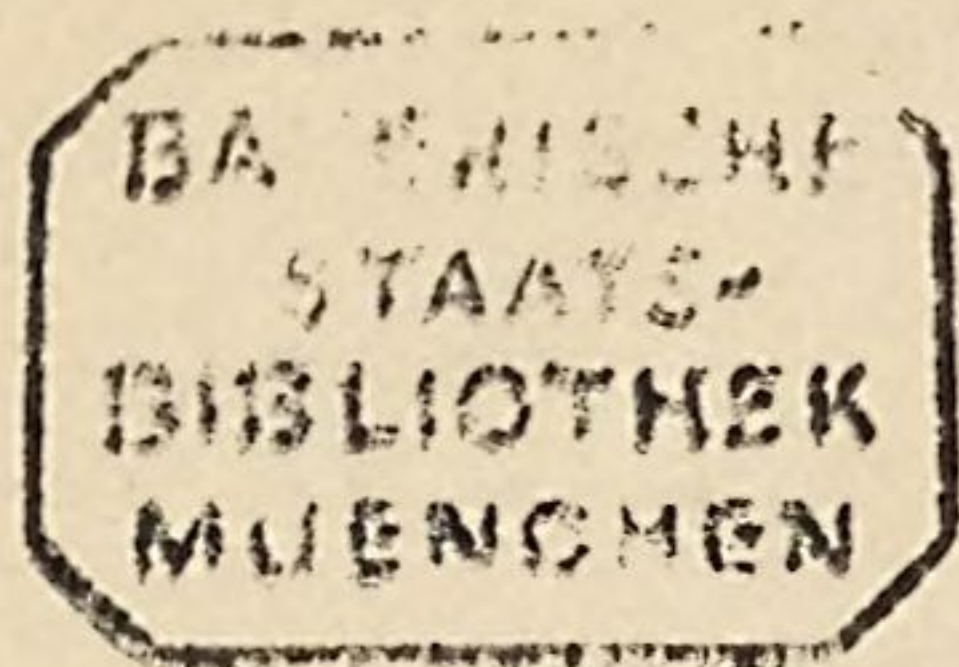
A DAUGHTER'S SACRIFICE.
BY
F. C. PHILIPS AND PERCY FENDALL.
IN ONE VOLUME.

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By F. C. Philips,

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DAUGHTER'S SACRIFICE.

A NOVEL.

BY

F. C. PHILIPS,

AUTHOR OF "AS IN A LOOKING GLASS," ETC.

AND

PERCY FENDALL.

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LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1890.



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A DAUGHTER'S SACRIFICE.

CHAPTER I.

MRS. MARONI.

WHEN first Mrs. Maroni came to live in the quaint old village of Pencarvon, in Cornwall, many were the conjectures as to her antecedents and past life. It did not seem natural that a young and beautiful widow should for ever remain inconsolable and eschew all society. And yet this is precisely what Mrs. Maroni did. It is needless to say that the gossips of the place determined that there must be something wrong about her—some terrible secret that she was trying to live down, a secret which had caused her to seek refuge in this little out-of-the-way place. Poverty could certainly not be urged as an excuse, for Mrs. Maroni was evidently wealthy and lived luxuriously, and, as some said, extravagantly. She had taken a lease of a large old-fashioned house in the neighbourhood, after having tried the climate first, during a residence of a

month at the village inn. The result of this trial had apparently been a satisfactory one, for Mrs. Maroni entered into negotiations for "The House," and secured the lease of it for some years.

Mrs. Maroni had two children, a boy and a girl—and her whole life seemed absorbed by them. If ever a mother was devoted to her children, to the exclusion of all else, that mother was Mrs. Maroni. She hated them to be out of her sight, and their slightest wish was, if possible, always gratified. When first she took possession of "The House," as it was always called, the boy was about twelve years old and his sister some two years younger. The boy, Harold, had a resident tutor, and the girl an accomplished governess. If Mrs. Maroni loved her children with a kind of wild idolatry, she did not on that account neglect their education. She was determined that they should have every advantage obtainable from learning, and in that respect, as indeed in all others, she conscientiously did her duty by them. Perhaps one of her greatest sorrows was when she was forced to part with Harold in order that he should go to Eton, but she bore the separation—the first that had ever taken place between them—with the courage of a Stoic, and did not allow her own sufferings—and they were sufferings indeed—to interfere with what she knew to be her son's permanent good.

In these days Mrs. Maroni still wore widow's mourning, and gave that as an excuse for making no acquaintances. The clergyman, and various other busybodies of the neighbourhood, called upon her and tried to extract something from her as to her reason for settling in Cornwall, but Mrs. Maroni had a quiet and effectual way of evading questions without answering them, which left people, actuated by curiosity, more in the dark than ever.

Years rolled on and Mrs. Maroni continued to set herself resolutely against any social intercourse, and the neighbours marvelled at her dull life and the obstinacy with which she apparently still clung to her husband's memory. The great majority of her neighbours resented this, and were unable to find any excuse for what they termed the widow's unfriendliness and ridiculous love of seclusion.

Occasionally, Mrs. Maroni would absent herself for a week or two at a time, and these little journeys always gave rise to a fresh burst of scandal, but Mrs. Maroni paid no heed to it whatever, and when she returned to Pencarvon was, as the gossips declared, more mysterious than ever. To her daughter Alice, she invariably told the same tale—she was going to see her mother—and when, as a child, Alice would ask to be taken too, she would tell her that the journey was too long, and that grandmamma lived a long way off, and

that travelling was very bad for children. Later on, when the girl was about seventeen, she again expressed the desire to see her maternal grandparent, and then it was that Mrs. Maroni told her for the first time that her mother had disapproved of her marriage and had always refused to see her children. Alice could hardly understand this explanation, but she accepted it, as indeed she accepted every statement made by her mother, with absolute faith. There were times when Mrs. Maroni was very sad, and it was in one of these moments of depression that she confided this to her daughter; at the same time she begged her not to ask her any further questions. "My life," said she, "has in the past been a very wretched one, but now I am happy with my children. I do my best to make them happy and they must ask for nothing more."

Alice loved her mother too well to cause her any pain, and, although she would dearly have liked to know a little more about her dead father, and what it was that caused her mother to lead such a secluded life, she respected her mother's wishes and spoke no more on the subject.

At the time this story opens Alice was nineteen, and her brother was then at Cambridge. She was a pretty girl, though it was doubtful if she would ever possess the great beauty of which her mother still retained traces. Mrs. Maroni was tall and had an ex-

quisite figure, and she also possessed what are commonly known as "classical features," that is to say, her nose was straight, her lips finely curved, and her eyes large and expressive. Alice, on the other hand, was small and had irregular features. Indeed hers was a sort of *gamine de Paris* countenance, hair *coiffé à la chien*, small laughing blue eyes, and a nose and mouth of which nothing could be said except that they possessed the charming freshness of youth. The handsomest member of the family was undoubtedly Harold, who inherited all his mother's beauty of face combined with a fine manly English figure. Seeing that he had all his life been spoilt, it was really wonderful that he should have turned out such an admirable specimen of what a young man ought to be. With no father to guide him, and only a mother's idolizing love, he might have become extravagant and wilful and dissipated, and any of the hundred and one bad things that young men develop when only under the influence of petticoat government. But he worshipped his mother, and for her sake, if not from principle or instinct, he took the right path in life and kept to it. When they were all at home it would have been difficult to have found a happier or more united family, search where you might. The young people used to say, like their mother, that they were quite indifferent to society,

and they followed her example in making but few acquaintances.

As this story opens it was within a few days of Harold's coming home for the long vacation, and both his mother and sister were looking forward to his arrival with unbounded delight. Into Mrs. Maroni's pleasure there entered, however, a certain amount of regret, for a day or two before she had received the announcement of her son's advent, she had told Alice that her mother was ill and had repeatedly asked her to pay her a visit. She was sorry to lose the pleasure of Harold's society even for ten days—or at most a fortnight—but still the visit must be paid, and the presence of Harold would make Alice feel her mother's absence less than if left alone in the great house.

Alice had become so accustomed to her mother's occasional journeys that she expressed no surprise at the announcement of this new visit. Mrs. Maroni was always depressed before these periodical flittings took place, and seemed much more cheerful when she came home. So she was glad that this journey would be undertaken before Harold arrived so that they might be all happy together when Mrs. Maroni returned. There was an old housekeeper—at least that was what she was called, though her duties in the house were very light and varied—who took charge of Alice

during her mother's absence, and on one or two occasions the young girl had tried to gather from her the true reason of her grandmother's dislike to her father. The housekeeper, however, was inscrutable, and indeed professed entire ignorance of the matter, and closed the discussion by saying that in the first place she knew nothing at all about it, and secondly, that if she did, she should keep the knowledge to herself. Seeing Mrs. James was firm, Alice desisted from further inquiry. The housekeeper had lived with Mrs. Maroni ever since Harold and Alice were babies, having originally entered her service as nurse, so that Alice knew that the first part of her answer was untrue; but she felt it useless to insist, and moreover began to think that it was scarcely fair to her mother to attempt to learn facts which she had plainly told her she did not wish to divulge. In the many conversations they had had together, Alice would sometimes allude to the quietude and monotony of her life and ask if it were always to remain so, and if it was intended that she was never to marry. Then old Mrs. James would shake her head and declare that marriage was a risky undertaking, and that she had better remain happy at home than make an unfortunate choice as her mother had done.

Occasionally Miss Maroni would be asked to a lawn tennis party or to a ball, but the latter festivity

was always declined, and it was only under great pressure that she was allowed to go to the afternoon entertainment. On these occasions she had few opportunities for flirtation offered to her; the men consisted mostly of curates, poor and discreet, and youths of tender age, who had no future to offer to a young lady who, it was known, would one day inherit very considerable wealth. So Alice had arrived at the age of nineteen and found herself heart-whole. Her mother was pleased that this should be so. She herself had had a stormy and eventful life, and had at last come to look upon man as a mortal enemy to woman. Later on, perhaps, Alice's hand might be sought by some steady-going respectable squire, with an entailed estate free from encumbrances and a satisfactory rent-roll. But she loved her daughter too well to let her make a marriage merely for the sake of being married, and she hoped that the longer her daughter remained with her the wiser and the happier would be her ultimate selection. Mother and child rarely conversed upon this subject. Alice was shy of approaching the topic with Mrs. Maroni, and although she could not help seeing that most of the young girls in the neighbourhood became engaged after they had been out two or three years, and sometimes thought about marriage in reference to herself, she was not particularly anxious to follow their example.

It was a July evening, one of those rare periods at which the country in England is bearable for people who do not hunt or shoot, and Alice and her mother were strolling about the garden after dinner discussing the approaching arrival of Harold. They had neither of them seen him for some months, and Alice wondered if he would be much changed in appearance.

"Harold will never change," said Mrs. Maroni. "He has that bright healthy beauty which knows but little change. His features and complexion will always remain young."

"Do you mean that I shall change because I am not so good-looking as Harold?" asked Alice.

"You are both children," answered Mrs. Maroni. "People only alter when they get to my age."

"And you are the most beautiful of the three," said Alice affectionately, "and you always will be."

Mrs. Maroni smiled.

"I used to be considered handsome once," she said, "but that is a long time ago now."

Her thoughts strayed back to the time when she was the belle of every place at which she was seen, and when every man was at her feet. How different was her life now! A heavy routine of dull respectability—twelve months of the year shut up in a dull English country house with only three or four weeks' break in which she paid certain flying visits to a certain

fictitious mother. And yet she found no fault with the life she was leading, and, indeed, had voluntarily imposed that life upon herself. She had her children and she wanted nothing more.

"Beauty is a delusion," she said aloud, although still continuing her train of thought. "It is a greater curse to the possessor of it than to those who are supposed to be its victims."

"It is not likely to be a curse to me," said Alice gaily. "And, according to your theory, I am better off without it."

"You may take my word for it," said her mother. And then they entered the house and rang the bell for prayers.

CHAPTER II.

LÉON DE TESLES.

THE next day Mrs. Maroni was *en route* for London. She had given Mrs. James, the housekeeper, final instructions as to the preparations for Harold's room and also as to her proper guardianship of Alice during her absence. The old woman liked the responsibility; she loved her nurselings, and she knew, moreover, that they had a sincere affection for her. They always followed her advice, and of this article she had an unlimited stock to give away. In the early days of her residence in Cornwall, Mrs. Maroni had been in the habit of taking Mrs. James with her to act as maid when she absented herself from "The House," but now that Alice had outgrown nurses and governesses, she felt it wiser to leave her at home, and so she travelled alone. She arrived in London in the evening, and at once drove to a private hotel in Albemarle Street, and immediately inquired if Monsieur de Tesles had arrived. She was well known at the hotel, and she was treated with much respect by the proprietor, who showed her at once to a brilliantly lighted apartment on the first floor where, he

said, the gentleman awaited her. Léon de Tesles was a handsome man, with what the French call "tired" features, but they lit up as he caught sight of Mrs. Maroni, and he came forward rapidly to greet her. The man was evidently a gentleman, but looked like a worn-out *viveur* who had lived his life. He was between forty and fifty years of age, with hair slightly sprinkled with grey, but yet with a face which, when he smiled, looked still young and pleasant.

"You are late," he said, "I have been expecting you for the last half hour."

"My train was late," answered Mrs. Maroni. "Trains always are in England. I don't know why, considering that punctuality is one of the many virtues English people claim as their own."

"English people are very funny with their virtue," said M. de Tesles; "I have been here for two days, and I have never seen a more immoral city in my life."

"All big cities are immoral," said Mrs. Maroni indifferently.

"That is why you live in the country, I suppose?" he asked.

"Exactly," she answered. And then she added, "I must take off my things. Is dinner ready? I am positively starving."

"Dinner, or what they call dinner in this country, has been ready for the last hour."

"Then I will make no toilette. I know what your temper is when the soup is cold." And she left the room.

Léon de Tesles smiled as the door closed upon her. He was always unfeignedly pleased to see her, she amused him more than any other woman, and their *grande passion* of bygone days had never become entirely extinct, although Mrs. Maroni had brought it to an abrupt close when she suddenly retired to the country and determined to devote herself entirely to her children. These furtive visits amused him perhaps more than if he had been able to see her every day. He paid for them it is true, and paid for them very dearly too, but money was of no consequence to him. He was immensely rich, and the gratification of a caprice of this nature made no perceptible difference to his exchequer. In a few moments Mrs. Maroni returned, and had made herself look as charming as possible in the interval. She was quietly dressed in a plain cloth dress that set off her magnificent figure to advantage, and she had given just those slight touches of art to her face which a woman of her age requires.

"You have been making yourself beautiful, and have succeeded," said M. de Tesles, looking at her admiringly.

"I have only put some powder on," she answered frankly, looking at herself carelessly in the glass. "I

believe in the proverb, 'Spare the powder and spoil the face.'"

"I didn't know there was such a proverb."

"No more did I until I invented it," she said laughing.

"And now tell me how are you all at Pencarvon?" asked the Frenchman.

"We are quite well. How could we be otherwise when we never have anything to disturb us? Our lives are the same all the year round. We never have even an epidemic or a mad dog in the village, and the only excitement I can recollect during the last twelve months was when the cows got loose and attacked a hay stack. People never die in Cornwall except from old age—and not often from that. I verily believe it's the healthiest spot on earth."

"And the dullest?"

"You would find it dull. I don't."

"Then you still like your stables and your kitchen garden, and your pigs, and your pigeons, and the conservatories?"

She nodded her head.

"Yes; I like peace and quietness," she said.

"Even after ten years of it?"

"Even after ten years."

"And Mademoiselle Alice, is she not longing for another life, for a little more action?"

"She does not say so. She is quite happy, and knows nothing of the world except what I tell her, and you may be sure that I do not draw a very flattering portrait of its attractions."

"And yet the world has been kind to you."

"Do you really think so?"

"In a certain sense, yes. You have everything for which you could possibly wish. What more do you desire?"

"I suppose you are right. I might say that I should like to be able to go into a drawing-room without fear of being *chassée* by its mistress; but it would not be true. I have no such desire, and I prefer to remain at home."

"And yet you abuse the world."

"I don't abuse the Cornwall world. I think it is a delightful one, especially so for my daughter; but my opinion of the real world—the world as you and I understand it—is that it is a vile congregation of despicable humanity."

"What a thrilling speech. Where did you get it from?"

"From my past experience, I suppose; but I dare say I was a little more vehement than the occasion required. In reality I agree with the French philosopher who merely said '*que la vie est bête!*'"

"He was quite right," acquiesced the Frenchman.

"It is stupid; stupid, commonplace, and unsatisfactory, even for people like ourselves, who have no illusions. What must it be for those who still have beliefs, and who are constantly being disappointed?"

"Yes. I have done with all that," said Mrs. Maroni. "I have no disappointments because I have no hopes and no ambitions. I live a dull country life; but if I have no friends, I have, at any rate, no disillusion." "

"And you continue to shun your neighbours?"

"I continue to take the initiative. It is so much better to be beforehand in these cases. If I struggled into a dull society it would bore me to death. I should not only have the dulness to put up with, but I should be living in a constant state of terror that something respecting my past life might crop up. As it is, if I am dull—and Heaven only knows how dull I am—I have, at all events, peace of mind."

"And you have ceased altogether to long for a more exciting life? What do you do all day?"

"I read a great deal. When I settled in Cornwall I found my mind capable of much improvement, and I am doing my best to improve it."

"You are a marvel," he said, looking at her admiringly. "Who would have thought when first I knew you that you would have ever settled down into an English country lady?"

"It is not very marvellous," she said quietly.

"The love of the domestic hearth comes to every one sooner or later."

"It has not yet come to me."

"I am not so sure of that. Why do you like to see me? I am not noisy or brilliant like your associates in Paris. I am humdrum and staid, old and *passée*, and yet for the sake of bygone days you encounter the horrors of the Channel passage and spend a week or ten days in my company."

"How can a woman of six and thirty be 'old and *passée*?' To my mind you are more beautiful than ever. Your company brings me reminiscences of youthful days."

"And youthful follies which it were surely wiser to forget. No, there is no accounting for these tastes which have not even the excuse of novelty. You in your friendship for me are every bit as unaccountable as I am in my love of seclusion."

"You speak of my friendship for you—have you none for me?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I owe you everything in life. Of course I have a friendship for you."

"You did not say so always. Do you remember that day in Paris when we had our great scene?"

"Yes, I remember it," she said smiling. "But I was younger then. It was ten years ago and I knew

less of the world then. Now that I understand men and can follow their motives I have more indulgence to them. By the bye, how is your wife?"

"I never hear anything of her. I suppose she is well."

"Still in Italy?"

"I hope so. At any rate, she never comes to Paris."

"And Paris, delightful as ever, I suppose? Is it much changed since I was there?"

"There are a few new streets, a few new faces—otherwise nothing is altered. The shops always remain the same, the theatres always play the same pieces, and the same people have acted in them for the last twenty years. No, I don't think you would find much alteration in Paris."

"I suppose it is too late to go to a theatre to-night," said Mrs. Maroni; "what time is it?"

M. de Tesles looked at his watch.

"It is too late, and too hot," he said, "we shall enjoy ourselves much more sitting quietly at home, sipping our coffee."

Mrs. Maroni rose from her seat as the dinner came to an end and went to the window and looked out. There were three nigger minstrels opposite the hotel yelling forth discordant comic songs, and they looked up at her and grinned, as they held out their hats for money.

"How I hate London," she said, withdrawing from the window and resuming her place at the table. "For all the money in the world I would not live here."

"Why do you hate it?" asked the Frenchman.

"I hate its climate, its dimly-lit streets, its depressing air of gentility, and its total absence of light-heartedness and elegance. Every one seems in a hurry to make money here, and what do they do when they have made it? They bore themselves to extinction in stupid grandeur, or make themselves miserable in ceaseless struggles to know people better than themselves."

"What a strange humour you are in to-night," said M. de Tesles.

"I am always in a strange humour, if you mean by that that I am cynical," she said. "I confess I have no good nature or tolerance for the faults of others."

"And yet you require indulgence yourself?"

"Not from the world. I ask no favours from it, and therefore I am not beholden to it."

"I wonder if you will ever get tired of your country life, and look upon the world in a different light?"

"I think not. Each time I see you, you ask me the same question, and ten years ago you predicted that I should not endure my solitude for more than six months, and yet you see you were wrong."

"There is no accounting for women's whims," said M. de Tesles, lighting a cigarette.

"A whim that lasts ten years can scarcely be called by that name," she answered, and then added almost passionately, "and mine was certainly not the caprice of a *blasée* woman. It was a violent craving to hide my real position and character from two innocent children who considered me perfection, for I felt that if ever they learnt their mother's shame, I should be ready to cut my throat."

"It would be a pity to disfigure that plump, white throat," said the Frenchman, puffing his smoke up to the ceiling.

"Yes, you can afford to speak lightly of my feelings," she said bitterly. "You who hold me in your power, and even after twenty years make me obey you."

The Frenchman smiled.

"You speak very strongly," he said, "surely what I exact from you is not very hard. A few days spent in London once or twice a year and that is all. Your dressmaker could scarcely ask for less."

"A few days spent in London, and a bushelful of lies before I come and after I return—lies told my children who innocently believe every word I tell them, lies which make me loathe myself more and more each time I utter them."

"Oh, yes, I forgot I was their grandmother," he said smiling. "After all, that is a very small fib. Every servant has a sick aunt when she wants a day out."

"And I object to placing myself on a level with servants. Every time I come I declare shall be the last."

"If it amuses you to make that declaration, pray go on doing it. You know the alternative. If the mountain won't come to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain; and you know that I have always had a longing to see my—grand-children."

"I know that it is useless to quarrel with you, and I know that it is equally useless to plead for mercy. I suppose that things must go on as they are and I must make the best of it. Let us talk of something else. Shall I tell your fortune?"

"By the cards?"

"Yes. It is the one remnant which I cling to of my former life. In the long winter evenings when I am tired of reading I do interminable *réussites*, and sometimes I give myself what the fortune-tellers call a 'cut.' "

"And does it ever come true?"

"Never, I am happy to say. I see presents from fair men with good hearts, letters from dark men and false women, disagreeable surprises and fresh acquaint-

ances, sea journeys, and law papers. But it all comes to nothing and my life goes on exactly the same."

"I think I know my fortune," he said.

"Everybody thinks so," she answered; "and yet we are merely bits of straw blown about by good and bad winds. It takes very little to alter our destiny."

Mrs. Maroni was evidently in a moralizing humour on this particular evening. She and her companion continued to talk thus until far into the night, and the Frenchman was much amused at her cynical mood. And yet he himself had taught her all she knew of the world and that kind of spurious philosophy of which she was rather proud.

They had met at Cairo twenty years ago, when she was a girl of sixteen. Léon de Tesles was then living with his father, who was one of the richest merchants in the eastern capital, and he made the acquaintance of Mrs. Maroni, who was then Miss Grainger, the daughter of a man holding a small official appointment, at her father's house. The young couple were thrown much together and speedily fell in love; but on neither side did the parents view the attachment with satisfaction. Léon's father merely declared that the marriage was impossible, and troubled himself no more about the matter; while Mr. Grainger had a horror of Roman Catholics and vowed that his daughter should never marry one.

So the young couple took the law into their own hands, and one fine morning embarked for Marseilles. It was here that Miss Grainger discovered that she had placed her faith in a worthless man, and that breaking the Fifth Commandment often speedily brings its own punishment.

Léon, who was then only twenty-four years of age, informed his victim that a marriage was impossible, as he already had a wife living. They had been separated, he said, for the last two years, and he did not know what had become of her. He hoped he should never hear of her again, or at least not within the prescribed time allowed by the law for him to make another marriage. Meanwhile there was nothing to be done but wait patiently until he should be free. Would she consent to this arrangement? Of course, in the meantime, he should consider her as morally, if not legally, his wife, and he would make every settlement for her future provision. Helen Grainger loved the man even after the confession of his perfidy, and the alternative of refusing his offer was not a rosy one. She dared not go back to her father, whom she knew perfectly well would not receive her, and her pride revolted at explaining the situation to other relations. So tears were shed and the old well-known reproaches were cast at his head, but in the end Miss Grainger gave way and in due time returned with him to Cairo.

Her father never spoke to her again, nor indeed did she ever attempt to induce him to do so; and her life at Cairo was not an enviable one. Still she was young, and enjoyed the wealth which was placed at her disposal. She had a box at the opera, and wore almost more diamonds than all the harem put together. Men crowded round her, and she certainly enjoyed the free easy life and the admiration she excited. She had plenty of money to spend, she could wander round the bazaars all day buying rich stuffs and jewels, and her house was a marvel of richness and good taste. During her residence at Cairo, Harold and Alice were born, but before they could speak they were sent to England in charge of the person who was now house-keeper at "The House," and then one day M. de Tesles' father died, and he came into unlimited wealth. He quickly sold his interest in the house and returned to Paris with Helen Grainger. Madame de Tesles enjoyed a brief stay in the Capital of Pleasure, but during all the time there was no mention made of marriage.

The real Madame de Tesles still lived, and regularly drew an allowance from her husband. If she knew of the *liaison*—and it is scarcely possible she could have remained in ignorance of it—she never alluded to it, and rumour went so far as to aver that she had consoled herself with an Italian tenor. Madame

de Tesles number two had long ceased to think of marriage. Léon always laughed at the idea, and then suddenly she was seized with a wild impulse to put an end to it all. She had been on a visit to England to see her children, and the craving to be a good mother and a respectable member of society in some unaccountable fashion possessed her. In words little less brief than the *c'est fini entre nous deux* of "Ma Camarade," she announced her intention, and of course Léon de Tesles did not believe her. He knew that she was rich, that she must have saved much money during the years they had been together, but he did not believe in such a sudden termination to their happiness. Madame de Tesles, however, did not flinch from her determination, and in a few weeks she had installed herself at Pencarvon. She hoped never to see, never to hear anything more of the father of her children. But Léon had other views. She was what he called *une vieille habitude*, and he could not do altogether without her. He continued to make her an allowance of five thousand a year, but it was upon the stipulation that they should occasionally meet as good friends and nothing more. To this Helen acceded. Indeed she had scarcely any choice in the matter, as her former lover might have hunted her out and revealed himself to her children if she had chosen to be obstinate.

So she adopted a fictitious name, assumed fictitious

mourning, and buried herself in the country. She loved her children devotedly and saved the greater part of her income so that they might have good fortunes when she should be no longer there to watch over them.

As she bid Léon good-night on this particular evening she said:

"I have only been in London a few hours, and I am already longing to be back at home."

"You are a model for all mothers," he said with a yawn, "you pretend to be cynical, and yet you are overflowing with the milk of human kindness."

"Scarcely that," she said with a deprecatory smile, "even a tigress loves her cubs, you know."

CHAPTER III.

CAPTAIN MALLORET.

NEXT morning Mrs. Maroni went out shopping. She went alone, as Léon de Tesles rarely got up until the middle of the day, while she, on the other hand, conformed to English habits and ate a hearty English breakfast. She was strolling up Bond Street looking idly in at the windows, when she was accosted by a man whose recognition of her evidently afforded her no pleasure. The man was a friend of bygone years, an Englishman who had known her at Cairo, and later on in Paris, and who had all her story at his fingers' ends. He was a good-looking man of the dare-devil type, middle aged and well dressed, but who, nevertheless, did not inspire you with confidence.

"You are not going to cut me, Mrs. ——?" he said. "Surely we are too old friends for that."

"You evidently would not let me if I wished to do so," she said with a smile.

"I am bound to say that, as a rule, I hate to be recognized," he answered. "I owe money to almost

every person I meet, so that I am never very eager to shake hands with my acquaintances."

"Then what are you doing in Bond Street?" she asked. "Surely this is the most dun-infested street in all London."

"I suppose it is, but my tradespeople have long since given me up as hopeless. It is only my friends who bother me."

"That is worthy of a Balzac," she said laughing.

"And you?" he asked. "I heard you were living in the country—that you had become *chanoinesse* or superior of a convent, or something equally dignified. Is it true?"

"I am living in the country," she answered, "but not as a nun or a *chanoinesse*."

"Where do you live?"

"A long way from here," said Mrs. Maroni.

"Is it a convenient place for hiding? May I come and pay you a visit?"

"No, you may not; I receive no visitors."

"Then you are married? And Léon de Tesles, what has become of him?"

"He is living in Paris," she answered.

"I heard it was all over," he said.

"Yes, it is all over."

"And—are you married?"

"No, I am a widow," she answered, with rather a

harsh laugh. "What I believe is known as a *table d'hôte* widow."

Captain Malloret laughed. "Ah, well, all things must have an end," he said. "And the children?"

"The children are grown up."

"Do they live with you?"

"Naturally. I am their only parent."

"And that is why you refuse to see me."

"I see no one. I never have a visitor from year's end to year's end."

"And you can't make an exception in my favour?"

"You would not be able to stand the life. I have no attractions to offer you."

"It would amuse us to talk over old times, and you need not fear my being bored. If you only knew my life here. I live with an alarming old widow in a dull Bayswater terrace. She nabbed me by an advertisement in the *Times*, and now she wants me to marry her. She has two children who lead me a life of perdition. But, after all, there is certainly one consolation," he added. "I never pay her."

"And does she feed you?" asked Mrs. Maroni.

"She feeds me, she lodges me, she washes me, and she would even clothe me if I would let her. I tell you she loves me!"

"Then I congratulate you. Why don't you marry her?"

"You must come and see her. That will be quite enough answer to your question."

"Is she rich?"

"No. She advertised for a boarder, so I need not tell you that she isn't a millionaire."

"And you are stone broke."

"I have been stone broke for the last ten years."

"And your people, are they still alive and stony-hearted?"

"Oh, they are just the same as ever; but now that I have anticipated everything, it doesn't much matter how long they live. My uncle, old Lord Kingsborough, occasionally sends me a 'tenner,' but that's all."

And then Mrs. Maroni declared that Captain Malloret was interfering with her shopping, and told him that she had only a few days to spend in London, and a great quantity of things to do.

"You must let me go with you and do your shopping," he said, "I can give you excellent advice."

So she laughingly gave him permission, and they started off together. After an hour spent in various shops, buying presents for Harold and Alice, and very little for herself, Mrs. Maroni said that she must return home. "I am very hungry," she said, "and am longing for my luncheon."

"Won't you ask me to share it with you?" said Captain Malloret.

"No. You must have luncheon with your widow," she laughed. "I never receive people in the hotel."

"Your rules of etiquette make you very inhospitable, but I will see you to the door."

"You must leave me at the corner of the Arcade," she said.

And so Malloret strolled to the end of it with her, and then wished her good-bye. He watched her walk up the street, and then, to his surprise, he saw Léon de Tesles come out of the hotel and walk towards her.

"So that's it, my lady," he said to himself, as he saw them greet each other. "Then I was wasting my sympathy when I said 'all things come to an end,' and you are not yet a *table d'hôte* widow."

And then he pondered over past times, and thought of the days when he had known her as the reigning belle of Cairo. "How strange that she should have still kept up this acquaintance with Léon de Tesles." It was only women who ever had such luck, he thought to himself. "Twenty-five years' *liaison* with one of the richest men in France! And now, even after that lapse of time, de Tesles came forward to meet her with delight beaming on each of his features. What fools men are!" he said. And then he decided that he must take her advice and go home and have luncheon with his widow.

CHAPTER IV.

THE POTTER FAMILY.

MRS. POTTER, the lady who lodged, and fed, and washed Captain Malloret, was one of those miscalculating people who take houses too large for them. And when she realized the fact that she had done so, she made it known to the world at large by an advertisement in the *Times*, wherein she set forth that she would be pleased to retrieve her mistake by receiving a boarder with unexceptionable references, "preference given to a retired military officer." The advertisement caught the eye of our friend, Captain Malloret, and he at once entered into negotiations with Mrs. Potter, the result being that within a few days he took up his abode in Clan William Terrace, and prepared to enjoy the "cheerful musical society," which the relict of the late Mr. Potter offered as one of the many advantages that residence under her roof would entail.

The cheerfulness of the society was provided by Mrs. Potter's own offspring, whom, after a few days' acquaintance, Captain Malloret described as "two out

and out devils," and the music consisted of Mrs. Potter's own efforts to render "Let me dream again," and "I'm a merry little mountain maid," in a voice which she modestly declared was "not strong, but, as her friends told her, was very sweet."

After a week's residence in this "home," Captain Malloret decided that nothing would induce him to remain there, but the days passed by and the widow's gush increased, and remittances were not forthcoming, so he gradually allowed himself to drift into the life and he had now been there for nearly a year.

Miss Potter was about sixteen, and was what is known as a "romp." Master Potter was a twin brother, with a cracked voice, which he occasionally displayed in a duet with his mother. Both brother and sister had lively minds and were fond of practical jokes, and they soon discovered that Captain Malloret was the very person on whom to practise their little pleasantries. The result of the cat's latest confinement would invariably be deposited in his bed as soon as that oft-recurring event had taken place. They sharpened their slate pencils with his razors, and they would brush his hat the wrong way, and then call over the staircase "Who shot the donkey?"

At first Captain Malloret had been furious, and had told Mrs. Potter that life in such a menagerie was impossible, but the good-natured widow only sighed and

said they had all been young once, and that she would speak to her children seriously. Whether she did speak to them or not, Captain Malloret never knew; but the jokes continued, and then the Captain spoke on his own account, and swore that he would batter their brains out at their very next offence. But the playful ones only laughed, and Theresa, the "romp," made a face at him, and retorted with scathing sarcasm "Why don't you pay ma?" and Augustus, who always followed her, had echoed "Yes, why don't you pay ma?" This question Captain Malloret felt to be so unanswerable that he merely shrugged his shoulders and walked away, and what brains the flighty couple possessed remained in their heads.

It was an awful life, especially for a man who had been in a crack regiment and had all his life been accustomed to good society. But there was nothing to be done. If you fail to cut your coat according to your cloth, the result is a very sorry garment. And this is precisely what Captain Malloret had failed to do. He had always spent double his income, and provided for the difference by utilizing his friends for loans, varying from five to five hundred pounds. Naturally the time came when "the worm turned," and in fact these worms turned *en masse*, and now the gallant Captain was penniless and almost without a friend in the world. No wonder, then, that he swallowed the sentimental

widow's foolish flattery with the same gusto that he swallowed her food. The children were a nuisance, but they must be tolerated for the sake of the roof over his head and the bacon he had for his breakfast. As to any further intimacy, however, that was quite out of the question. He could never become a stepfather to two such monsters as he considered Theresa and Augustus. The widow gave him encouragement and even darkly hinted that she needed the protection of a man's strong arm and powerful brain to balance her own giddy one. Malloret received these confidences in stolid silence and never even returned the burning pressure with which she squeezed his hand when she wished him good-night and bade him good-morning.

The day after his meeting with Mrs. Maroni was Sunday, and this was always the worst day of the week for him. To begin with, there was early dinner—an institution which he looked upon in the light of a crime—and the family also remained much more at home than on week days. When once they had paid their devotions at a neighbouring chapel, they returned home and gave themselves up for the rest of the day to domestic harmony. The "Leisure Hour" was brought out and read aloud by Theresa until Mrs. Potter went to sleep, and then followed tea and muffins, enhanced by playful sallies on the part of the widow and puerile jokes on the part of the twins. After tea came a little

music, and Augustus would seat himself at an old worn-out harmonium, and his mother with her hand upon his shoulder would deliver herself of "Abide with me," occasionally giving an arch glance at her boarder. After the music, came supper, and on this occasion, Mrs. Potter, undaunted by her lodger's arrears, announced that she had provided a little extra delicacy. Captain Malloret had all the evening smelt a powerful aroma of onions, which had, so to speak, even overcome "Abide with me" and "Hold the fort," and when Mrs. Potter made this announcement, he casually asked her what it was.

"Tripe!" said the lady, with a swelling look of pride.

"Tripe!" he ejaculated faintly, "I don't even know what it is."

"It's entrails," said Master Augustus, "but it's jolly good all the same."

"Do they never eat tripe in the army?" asked Theresa, in her most scornful voice.

"I suppose not, as I have never tasted it," he answered. "And Augustus's description of it is certainly not very tempting."

"You really should not say such things," said Mrs. Potter, looking at her son severely. "You will take away the captain's appetite."

"It would take more than tripe to do that," muttered

Theresa, who never spared him. Nevertheless, the supper was not the success that Mrs. Potter had anticipated. The sight of the tripe perfectly sickened the noble captain, and, with a disgusted look upon his face, he begged to be told why it was so "flabby."

"It's boiled in milk," said Mrs. Potter, with a hurt expression on her face. "It requires great delicacy of preparation." And then she added more humbly, "Can't I tempt you?"

"No, thank you," said Captain Malloret. "I dare not make the experiment."

Then there was a chilly silence, broken later on by Theresa inquiring if she and her brother might go to the play that week, they wanted to see that new burlesque at the Gaiety.

"I couldn't let you go alone," said her mother, "and, as you know, I never go to the theatre myself. If the captain has an evening free, perhaps I might intrust you to his care."

But the Captain's face expressed even more horror at this proposal than it did when the tripe made its appearance.

"I am afraid I haven't an evening free," he said, with a glare at Theresa.

"Oh, do take us," said Augustus, getting up and putting his arm round his neck with infantile familiarity.

"I can't," gasped Malloret, whose disgust had now reached a culminating point.

"Why not?" pleaded Augustus, still clinging to him.

"Because I loathe you all," was on his lips, but he controlled himself and said, "Sit down and I'll tell you."

Then Augustus released his hold and departed, leaving a strong odour of onions in his wake, the benefit of which Malloret had full in his face.

"My children always go to the 'family circle,'" said Mrs. Potter proudly. "There would be no occasion to be ashamed of them."

"And ma would pay," added Theresa spitefully.

"I was not thinking of that," said Malloret, "but I have some friends who are in London for a few days, and I expect I shall be much taken up with them."

Against this there was nothing to be said, so the idea was dismissed and the evening passed off amidst general gloom and depression. Mrs. Potter was not pleased at the haughty manner which her boarder had adopted towards herself and her offspring, and when she wished him good-night, and for the hundredth time received no acknowledgment of her gentle pressure, she determined that she would write to him and remind him of his obligations. As soon as he had retired to rest, she said to Theresa, "Get me the pen and ink,

child, I am going to write to the captain." Theresa did as she was told, and then both she and her brother came and sat on either side of their mother, and with their elbows on the table, and their chins resting in their hands, they watched her indite the following epistle;

"MY DEAR CAPTAIN,

"When disagreeable subjects have to be mooted, it is pleasanter for all parties to *write* them. I feel I could not *say* to you what I am *reluctantly* making my *trembling* pen write.

"Dear captain, when you entered my *humble little home* and agreed to pay me two guineas a week for board and lodging, with use of piano and bath, I asked you for a reference. You told me that you were a nephew of the Earl of Kingsborough, and an officer and a gentleman. I believed you, and I do so still, even though it is now twenty-eight weeks since you settled your account. Were I a rich woman, or even possessed of moderate wealth, I would *scorn to remind you* of the fact, which doubtless you have forgotten midst the *vortex of society* in which I have every reason to believe you move. But I am poor; and rent, and rates, and taxes, and gas, and butchers' bills must be paid, and it is for this reason that I again inclose your little account, with an urgent request that I may receive

a cheque in the course of the week. Do not take amiss my little note, but believe that I am your attached friend,

“MATILDA POTTER.”

“I think that will do,” she said, as she read it aloud.

“It’s not half strong enough,” cried Augustus, “he will only laugh at it.”

“Augustus is right,” said Theresa, “it isn’t half strong enough. You should have threatened him with gaol, ma.”

“My dear child,” expostulated Mrs. Potter, “remember he’s a gentleman.”

“Then it’s a pity he can’t behave like one,” retorted Theresa.

“May I take it up in the morning with his hot water, and wait for an answer?” inquired Augustus.

“Certainly not,” replied his mother. “I object to your doing menial work.”

Next morning, however—it does not matter at whose hand—Captain Malloret received this pleasant little missive, and received it, too, with a string of oaths, and, when he had exhausted his blasphemy, he pondered for a few moments and then said to himself, “I suppose I shall have to pay her. I must look up Helen de Tesles and see if she will not assist me.”

CHAPTER V.

CAPTAIN MALLORET COMMENCES OPERATIONS.

CAPTAIN MALLORET wrote a very cross answer to the widow's touching appeal. He was expecting some remittances in a few days, he said, and he would doubtless be able to pay her during the present week. As a matter of fact he had nothing whatever in view, but he had made up his mind to call upon Mrs. Maroni and ask her to lend him a couple of hundred pounds. She was one of the few people of his acquaintance who had escaped his demands, and yet they had been great friends at one time, and she must surely have plenty of money to spare. If, however, he was unlucky enough to fail, then he would ask Léon de Tesles, whom he had known well in the Cairo days, and who he felt could not possibly refuse his request. Still, it was Mrs. Maroni herself upon whom he actually set his highest hopes.

Captain Malloret made himself look as spruce as possible, and fortunately the twins had not upon that occasion interfered with the gloss of his hat, and he was able to make a tolerably decent appearance. As

he walked past the dining-room Theresa called out to him:

"Are you going out, Capting? Shall you be home to luncheon?"

"It's not tripe this time; it's hashed mutton," added the irrepressible Augustus.

"I shall not be home till dinner," he answered.

"There won't be much for dinner, because cook's got to go and see her daughter who's got small-pox," said Theresa. "I think you'd better wait and have some lunch." And then came a peal of laughter.

Malloret made no answer, but went out and slammed the door violently.

"Hashed mutton!" he said to himself, and shuddered. "I must get out of that hole by some means or other. Another week of it would kill me."

And then he took the Underground to St. James's Park, and from thence walked up to Albemarle Street. He scarcely knew in what fashion to ask for Madame de Tesles, but he mentioned the name indistinctly and left it to the waiter's judgment to decide if it were Mr. or Mrs. he required to see. He was shown into their sitting-room, and after waiting for a few minutes Mrs. Maroni made her appearance. She was considerably surprised to see him and not altogether pleased, for she could easily guess the errand on which he had come, and moreover she resented the intrusion.

"You seem quite astonished to see me," said he, holding out his hand to her.

"Well, yes, I do not remember asking you to call."

"Your memory seems altogether bad," he answered. "You told me that all was over between you and de Tesles, and directly afterwards I ascertained that he was staying in this very hotel with you."

"He is only here on business," she said. "What I told you yesterday was perfectly true—all is over between us."

"I am quite ready to believe you, especially as it is no concern of mine. But I will not beat about the bush. I, too, am here on business. I want you to lend me some money."

Mrs. Maroni smiled.

"Lend you some money!" she repeated. "How do you propose to repay it? What is your security?"

"Oh, you know I would not let you in. Besides, it is not very much I want—only a couple of hundred."

"Impossible, my dear Captain Malloret. I have no means of lending you such a sum without robbing my children, and I do not intend to do that."

"What nonsense!" he said. "You are as rich as the Rothschilds, and I really want the money."

"I don't know the exact amount of the Roth-

schilds' wealth," she said, "so I cannot contradict you. I am sorry you are hard up, but you must not expect two hundred pounds from me."

"Do you think de Tesles would let me have it?"

"I don't see why he should. He is in no way indebted to you."

"And you would do your best to prevent him, I suppose?"

"No; I should leave him to use his own judgment."

"I would give him a bill."

"Which would only be so much waste paper. No, Captain Malloret, you fly at too high game. I will give you a tenner, if you like, for I know I shall never see it again. But do not ask me to lend you two hundred pounds."

Malloret hesitated. He did not know what to say. Mrs. Maroni had refused his request, and he did not quite see how he could make her give him the money by threats, or he would not have hesitated to use them, so he decided that he would take the ten pounds and utilize at any rate part of it in finding out where she lived, for he felt that if once he presented himself in the country, Mrs. Maroni might not perhaps be so obdurate. There he could threaten her with exposure, and, surrounded by her children, she might not take such a high tone.

"I owe a hundred pounds where I live," he said, as a last desperate effort, "and they are always bothering me for money."

"I am sorry for you, and still more sorry for the people with whom you live, but I see no reason why I should pay your bills."

"I think friends might help each other," he said, and added with a grim smile, "it is only Christian-like."

"We will leave Christianity out of the question," she said coldly. "Will you have my tenner; yes or no?"

"Of course I must have it and am very thankful to get it. Can't you make it a pony?"

"I will see what I have in my purse," she said, smiling at his piteous expression, "I am really sorry for you. But why on earth don't you live within your income?"

"Income? I have none," he said.

"And yet you ask me to lend you two hundred pounds."

"You know what I mean," he answered crossly, "I should pay you back some day."

"Yes, I suppose you would," she answered, and then she counted out sixteen sovereigns from her purse and gave them to him.

He took them with a very bad grace, and as he chinked them together in his hand he said:

"Do you think it would be of any use to try de Tesles?"

"I am sure it would not," she answered. "I told him yesterday that I had met you and he did not even remember who you were."

"I used to know him very well," he said.

"I daresay; but people forget each other very quickly in this world."

"Poor people are always forgotten," he said bitterly.

"Always," she assented.

"It is very lucky that he has not forgotten you."

"It is strange," she said, "considering that I have given him every encouragement to do so."

And then Mrs. Maroni begged her visitor to go, and told him that it would be absolutely useless for him to call again. She was going to leave town immediately and all her time was taken up.

Captain Malloret had, as we have seen, plenty of assurance, but he could not very well remain after this, so he contented himself with making an inward resolution that they should meet again very soon. Sixteen pounds! It was a drivelling, ridiculous sum; and from a woman too who had thousands of pounds at her command, and the very shakiest of shaky positions. Still the clink of the money in his pocket was a welcome sound, and promised well for the future.

He walked to the Bristol and ordered an excellent

luncheon, and drank plenty of champagne, and then he returned in high spirits to Clan William Terrace. The twins were out, and he thanked Providence for the welcome fact, and then he put on his airiest manner and demanded a private interview with Mrs. Potter. The widow received him graciously in her own parlour, and then Malloret opened the subject of the note which he had received that morning.

"I will not hide from you that your letter pained me very much this morning, Mrs. Potter. It is not forgetfulness that has made me overlook your bill, it is merely a temporary embarrassment that too often comes to people who have their money invested in land. I have, however, been to my lawyer this morning, and he has promised me that I shall have my arrears paid in less than a month, in proof of this he has advanced me ten pounds, all of which I would willingly give you were it not indispensable for a gentleman to have some money in his pocket." As he spoke he took out a handful of sovereigns and showed them to her and then awaited her reply.

Mrs. Potter rose and walked across the room to him, and placing her hand affectionately on his shoulder, she said:

"Captain, you know I have confidence in you. I know a gentleman when I see one, and if I wrote to you last night, it was only under the influence of a

threat to cut off the gas. Keep your ten pounds, my dear Captain, and pay me when you can."

Captain Malloret, scoundrel as he was, was somewhat touched at this, and said rather sheepishly:

"Will you take half, Mrs. Potter?" and he held out five sovereigns.

"Well, if you insist, I will," she said, longing to take them all the time, "but I will not do so otherwise."

"It is just as you like," he said, equally reluctant to part with them.

"If I take them it is simply to please you," she said, possessing herself of the coins, "and to show there is no ill-feeling."

"Our feelings, my dear madam, remain the same," said Malloret, "I shall always respect and admire you;" but he wished all the same that she had not taken the money.

Poor Mrs. Potter was very weak as far as Captain Malloret was concerned, in the absence of her children. When goaded by them, or pained by unusual coldness on the part of her boarder, she would occasionally feel resentful and determined to have her money, but once she was alone with Malloret and underwent the influence of his courteous, pleasant manner, her heart relented and she would have given him all she possessed. Even now these five sovereigns burned in her hand and she

longed to give them back to him, but fortunately for her at that moment the twins bounded in and put an end to any such folly.

Malloret fled as soon as they came in and was seen no more until dinner-time, but the children were eager to know what had taken place.

"Has he paid?" they asked in one breath.

"He will pay," answered their mother, "he has been to his lawyer, and the lawyer has advanced him some money."

"How much?" (in a duet).

"Never mind—enough to pay the gas and that is all I care to think about at present," answered the improvident lady, and then they bothered her with more questions. Might they go to the play now that she had some money? They would go to the pit and walk there, and come home in a 'bus.

"I suppose I must let you go," answered the weak woman, who hoped for an evening alone with Malloret; and then they danced round her and kissed her and asked more favours. Might they start that very moment and take some sandwiches with them and a couple of bottles of ginger-beer? The theatre was sure to be crowded, for the burlesque was a great success, and unless they were at the doors early they would never get a front seat. To all this Mrs. Potter assented. She was sure at any rate of the Captain for

that evening, and they would have a delightful *tête-à-tête* together which would be all the more enjoyable as he was evidently in one of his rare good-humours.

So the twins bounded upstairs and washed their faces and combed their unruly hair, and then proceeded to the kitchen to obtain the dainties that were to be eaten at the door of the pit, and then they ran up to Malloret's room and after one loud bang at the door they burst in and bellowed out together:

"We *are* going to the play and we don't want you and we've got sandwiches and ginger-beer, and we shan't be home till twelve!"

Malloret looked at them in amazed silence, and then he said slowly and deliberately:

"I hope your ginger-beer bottles will burst and maim you both for life!"

"Do you?" said Theresa, suddenly losing her temper, "do you? And I hope you will like dining alone with ma!" with this parting shaft they tore downstairs falling over each other in their eagerness to get to the pit-door in good time, and then the door slammed with a loud bang, and once more peace reigned in the house.

It may easily be imagined that Captain Malloret did not relish spending an evening alone with his landlady. The occasions on which he had enjoyed this privilege had so far been rare, and he did not look

forward to a lively time with her. Still he controlled himself into declining the temptation to go and spend money at a restaurant, and like a Stoic, he made up his mind for the worst. Mrs. Potter "smartened herself up a bit" as she herself expressed it to the maid-of-all-work who was bidden to come and assist at her toilette. Her newest black silk was donned for the dinner and she artfully tucked in the two top corners of her bodice so that the snowy whiteness of her neck might be discovered. A profusion of rings were then placed on her large, red fingers, and a becoming arrangement of white lace surmounted the two rich black plaits which neither in texture nor colour bore any resemblance to the rest of her hair.

Mallorete noticed these unusual additions to her ordinary attire and looked upon them as evil omens. Evidently the widow meant to put forth all her fascinations, and it was doubtful where she would stop when once her feelings were roused and the eighteenpenny sherry had begun to take effect.

"You are quite smart to-night, Mrs. Potter," said Mallorete genially, as he took his place opposite her at the table.

The widow smiled a complacent, good-natured smile, and then said with what she considered a very roguish look:

"It is not often that I have the pleasure of dining

alone with you, Captain, and I feel that I must do honour to the event."

"You are always charming," he said with a grateful recollection of her disinterested remarks of the afternoon, and then he added in order to keep her on safe topics:

"How quiet the house seems without the twins."

"Yes, dear lambs, does it not? They are still such children, and I sometimes despair of their ever having any sense in their little feather brains."

"They certainly are very childish," said Malloret with great meaning.

"And so good-natured and affectionate," added the mother. "I think I've never met two sweeter dispositions. Augustus is almost like a girl, he is so soft and pliable."

Malloret said nothing. He had his own views about their sweetness, but it was a subject on which he could not flatly contradict their mother.

"I am afraid you do not like children, Captain," said the widow, after a pause, "that comes of not being a married man. You have no idea what a solace they can be."

And then with affected confusion, and looking down into her plate, she said:

"I wonder you have never thought of marriage."

"I am too poor to marry," said Malloret.

"But you might meet with some one who had a little money of her own," said Mrs. Potter, still with downcast eyes.

"I should require some one who had a great deal," he said coldly; and the widow felt that her hopes were dashed.

"Money is not everything," she said with an effort; "a warm, loving heart and a modest little competence would be enough for some people."

"I daresay," he answered carelessly; "but they would not suffice for me; besides, people in my rank of life do not possess warm, loving hearts or modest little competences, and I should never marry out of my own rank."

He hoped that that would be a final settler for her, but the widow rose again, and tried another tack—the tack of jealousy and competition.

"I have often been asked to alter my condition," she said. "I cannot tell you how many offers I have had since dear Mr. Potter's decease."

"I wonder you have never accepted any of them," he said, with genuine surprise.

"I could not give my hand where I did not give my heart," she said, looking at him with a look in which was blended faith, and love, and hope.

"Then I suppose you will never marry again," he said indifferently.

"I won't say that," she answered, again overcome by confusion. "I won't say that; but I must have the right man."

"Of course you must," he assented, "and I hope you will get him."

The widow sighed. She could not trust herself to speak, but the sigh spoke volumes, and an awkward silence reigned. Mrs. Potter broke it by again returning to the charge.

"Seriously speaking, Captain, why don't you marry?" she said.

"I have told you, Mrs. Potter, because I can't come across any one in my own position of life who has any money."

Then the landlady could find nothing more to say. She would like to have been sure whether Captain Malloret really considered his own position so immeasurably superior to hers. She was the widow of a gentleman who had been in business certainly, but they had never kept a shop, and nowadays she was told that many of the aristocracy were in trade. Younger sons of peers and county magnates started dressmaking establishments and bonnet shops, and still "moved in good circles," and even went to Court. Why should Captain Malloret allude to any social barrier, especially when it was well-known that "love levels all."

"Yes, I should not object to marriage if I could find a nice woman with a little money who was a lady," said Malloret, laying a slight emphasis on the last word.

"Would you object to a widow?" asked Mrs. Potter boldly.

"Not if she were young and had no children," answered Malloret cruelly.

"Children bring a blessing," sighed the poor lady, almost in tears.

"It is the first time I have heard of their doing so," he said; and he thought of the twins and the curse they were to his life.

"I am going to get you a glass of my very best old port," said Mrs. Potter, who had come to the end of her arts, and had determined to make a final effort to reach his heart through the medium of drink. "I have very few bottles left, but Mr. Potter was always proud of his port."

"You are too good," said Malloret smiling, and the amorous widow tripped out of the room with her face more beaming than ever. But the port had no more effect than the blandishments and the V shaped body, and the evening passed without Mrs. Potter having had one word of encouragement given to her. It was a positive relief to both when the twins came home and

recounted their evening's entertainment. Captain Malloret had been doing his best to overcome sleep during the last hour, and his landlady had gradually become more depressed as the time passed away and she found her sallies only met by coldness and indifference:

The twins had so much to say: the burlesque was so lovely, such beautiful songs and dances, and then Theresa fixed the captain with a most reproachful look and said:

"Your curse came true—one of the ginger-beer bottles did burst!"

"Yes," said Augustus; "we were in the front row of the pit; we had to wait three-quarters of an hour at the door, and after the first act I took the ginger-beer bottle out of my great-coat pocket, and the cork suddenly flew out, and all the contents went down a lady's back in the last row of the stalls."

"Yes," continued Theresa, "and you should have heard the scream she gave, and the language the gentleman used who was with her!"

Malloret could not help laughing.

"She had on a *very* low dress," proceeded Theresa, "and she was simply deluged!"

"She had to go out to be dried," added Augustus.

"And then an attendant came to us and made us

give up the other bottle," said Theresa. "It was so hard, because we were dying of thirst."

"You have evidently had a very exciting evening," said Malloret. And then he got up and wished them good-night, and retired to his own room to think over the best plan of extracting money from Helen de Tesles.

CHAPTER VI.

GEOFFREY KINGSTON.

A FEW days after her arrival in London, Mrs. Maroni received a letter from her daughter announcing the advent of her brother, and telling her that he had brought with him a college chum—Mr. Geoffrey Kingston. Alice told her that Mr. Kingston was a charming young man, a little older than Harold, and that his presence greatly enlivened the usual dulness of the house. And then she added that they were all longing for her mother to come back, and concluded her letter by expressing a hope that grandmamma was better.

Mrs. Maroni decided to return at once. Truth to tell, she was somewhat annoyed that Harold had brought home a visitor without first asking her permission. There was, of course, the excuse that her son did not know of her absence, but still he was perfectly well aware that she objected to strangers, and that no guests ever stayed at the house. She told M. de Tesles of the annoyance that this episode had caused her, and that she had made up her mind to return home the next day.

The Frenchman laughed at her for having this rooted objection to society. In her place, he said, he should be very pleased to think that the monotony of their lives was going to be broken. Then, too, the young man might turn out an acquisition, and, for all she could tell, might prove a desirable *parti* for her daughter.

"But I don't want Alice to marry," she said. "At least, not yet."

"And when is she to marry, then?" he asked. "Are you going to wait until she is forty or fifty?"

"I should like her never to marry at all," she said. "I should live in constant dread of her husband finding out something about me, and I should never have a moment's peace. You have read *Le Fils de Coralie*? Then you can understand my feelings."

"These things are different in England," answered M. de Tesles. "If a girl has a large fortune, as Alice will have, people don't look too particularly into its origin. There are not so many legal formalities to be gone through as in France."

"It would kill me if ever my children knew anything," she said.

M. de Tesles only shrugged his shoulders. His was not a mind that could enter into such fine feelings, and he was not hypocrite enough to pretend that it was.

"You have been so completely hidden for the last

ten years that I think you need have no fear of detection," he said.

"There are always busybodies who find out one's history, and very often scoundrels who are ready to speculate upon it." And as she said the words she thought for a moment of Stephen Malloret. And then she added that she was longing to go home, and that a very considerable period would elapse before she left it again. The Frenchman said nothing. He knew that when he should bid her come she would perforce comply with his request. So the next day Mrs. Maroni took her departure, and late in the evening was once more in her country home.

Her son and daughter welcomed her affectionately, and she evaded their questions about grandmamma by asking them to tell her all about themselves. She was introduced to Geoffrey Kingston, Harold's friend, later on. He had discreetly kept out of the way during the family greetings, but in the course of the evening he strolled into the drawing-room. Mrs. Maroni did not like his appearance. He was certainly a gentleman, and might pass for handsome. He was tall and had very close cropped dark hair which grew low down on his forehead, and he had regular features, the mouth being hidden by a heavy black moustache, but there was what is commonly called a "shifty" expression in his eyes, and his smile was not frank.

If Mrs. Maroni did not altogether like him, however, she soon realized the fact that her opinion was not shared by her daughter. Alice stole demure glances at him during the whole of the evening, and it was evident that there already existed between them a kind of harmless flirtation which Mrs. Maroni decided she would at once nip in the bud.

Her experience taught her that it was only natural that young people who met constantly in the same house, should be drawn together and, sooner or later, fancy themselves in love with each other, and she was more than ever annoyed with Harold for bringing his friend to Pencarvon. Indeed, when she was alone with her son, she told him as much, and said she thought it was an understood thing that she received no visitors.

"I fancied you would not mind making an exception in favour of old Geoffrey," said her son. "He is an awfully jolly fellow."

"I have no doubt he is," answered Mrs. Maroni, "but I scarcely see why I should make an exception in favour of an utter stranger."

"He is my greatest friend at Trinity," said Harold warmly.

"How long is he going to stay?"

"I mentioned no time. I merely asked him if he would mind being terribly bored in the country for

a few weeks, and that I had no attractions to offer him."

"A few weeks!" gasped Mrs. Maroni. "It is impossible. He cannot remain so long."

"You won't find him in your way, mother," said Harold. "He is out fishing with me all day, and in the evening we teach Alice billiards."

"And I don't want Alice to be taught billiards," answered his mother sharply. "I don't want her to be taught anything by him."

"Then do you mean to say that I am to tell him to go?"

"Not in so many words, but I cannot have him here for weeks together. You must make him understand that."

"I will do anything you wish," he said kindly, "and I am sorry his presence annoys you. You have always let me have my own way in everything, and I did not think that you would mind my bringing him here for a short time. He has no parents and no home, so it was really a kindness to ask him."

"I don't like men with no parents and no home," said Mrs. Maroni.

"It is not his fault, poor fellow," said Harold.

"I dare say not, but young men who have no refining influences are not the sort of people I care to throw with Alice." And then she added "Has he any money?"

"Not much, I am afraid. But, after all, he's a gentleman, and that's better than being rich."

"It used to be," said Mrs. Maroni, "but I think things have changed within the last few years."

"I don't wish to question your judgment, dear mother," said Harold, after a pause, "but surely Alice is not to lead a nun's life. She must know people sooner or later."

"She herself expresses no wish to go into society," said Mrs. Maroni. "She is quite happy with her present life if you are not."

"I am always happy when I am at home," said he. "My only sorrow is in leaving the best and kindest mother in the world."

"You are both good, dutiful children," answered Mrs. Maroni, "and I did not mean to speak unkindly of your friend. I am quite content that he should stay here for a short time. Only keep him out of doors as much as you can, and don't let your sister and me have too much of his society."

So the little cloud rolled by, and the domestic horizon was once more clear, but there were other clouds gathering in the future, which, when they showed themselves, would be both black and threatening.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BEGINNING OF LOVE.

GEOFFREY KINGSTON did his best to ingratiate himself with Mrs. Maroni, but quite early in his visit he plainly saw that she had taken a dislike to him, or, at least, resented his intrusion. But he liked the dull, quiet life of Pencarvon, and he determined that, short of a decided hint, he would remain there as long as it pleased him. He was great friends with Harold, and Alice's fresh beauty and total unconventionality interested him. If she was not actually lovely, she was quite pretty enough to flirt with, and for a man with no home or "refining influences," as Mrs. Maroni had put it, such a life was very enjoyable. Alice held very much the same opinion of him. He was very nice to flirt with, but then her ideas of young men and flirtation were limited. She scarcely knew the meaning of the latter word, and certainly would not have been able to give a definition of it if called upon to do so; but she thought young Kingston very handsome, and she liked the compliments he paid her, but whether this was love, or merely an ordinary liking, she would

have been unable to say. They scarcely ever met, save in the presence of either Mrs. Maroni or Harold, but occasionally in the evening Geoffrey would ask her to play, and then he would hang over the piano and turn over the leaves of her music, and murmur soft words of praise which brought the colour to her cheeks, and which irritated Mrs. Maroni, who felt powerless to interfere.

A fortnight passed, and still Mr. Kingston remained at Pencarvon, not having as yet received the hint that should determine his departure. Mrs. Maroni had become accustomed to him and even liked his careless, outspoken way of conversing. If it had not been for Alice she would actually have enjoyed his presence. When alone with her he was courteous and deferential, and yet he spoke cynically and cleverly of the world in a way which amused her, and reminded her of some of her Paris friends. But, with all this, she gathered that he was not the husband for Alice. He had avowedly no money, and her daughter would be given twenty thousand pounds on her marriage, and had, therefore, every right to be particular as to whom she chose.

A few days after her return to Pencarvon Mrs. Maroni received a visit from some influential neighbours, who informed her that a grand lawn-tennis tournament was about to be given at their place, which

was some ten miles off, and they begged that Harold and Alice might assist at it. Mrs. Maroni at first demurred, and said that she so rarely had the pleasure of her son's society that she could not bear him out of her sight during his few weeks' vacation. The lady who was calling upon her was a Mrs. Perry, and she made light of all these obstacles; she had two daughters, and she declared that young people must enjoy themselves, and that it was selfish of parents to wish to keep them always by their side. So, after much persuasion from her, Mrs. Maroni gave her consent, and even mentioned that she had a visitor in the house to whom she begged Mrs. Perry to extend her invitation.

When the young people heard of it they were naturally delighted, and the approaching tournament was the principal topic of their conversation for the next few days. They spent the mornings in diligently practising the game—at least, Alice and Harold did. But Geoffrey Kingston said from the first that he would never be up to tournament form, so he sat lazily watching them with Mrs. Maroni, and talked nonsense to her about the humbug and hypocrisy of the world. Mrs. Maroni would have been very welcome had she cared to accompany the young people to the Perry's, but it was well known that nothing would induce her to leave her home, so that no one ever thought of asking her now. Kingston was puzzled by her obstinacy in refus-

ing all invitations, and made various little attempts to draw her out on the subject, but Mrs. Maroni knew the world too well to make him any confidences, and his questions were quietly but effectively parried by that excellent mistress of fence.

Kingston had sufficient intuition to be quite certain that there was some reason for Mrs. Maroni burying herself in this out-of-the-way place. She did not come there on account of having friends in the neighbourhood, and she resolutely set her face against all social intercourse. She had not the plea of ill-health even, and to urge that she mourned a dead husband would, of course, be ridiculous. If she could talk, as she did occasionally to him, in a hard, reckless manner, showing no belief in the higher qualities of man, it was very evident that she could cherish but little respect or regard for her husband's memory. Kingston felt that he would like to know her past, but it was plain that accident could alone divulge it to him. Clearly Mrs. Maroni would not do so, and her visitor was too well bred to ask impertinent questions of her children.

When the day came for the Perrys' festivity, Alice put on the new dress that her mother had brought her down from London, and looked a charming picture of fresh girlish *ingénuité*. They were to be driven by Harold in his dog-cart and Geoffrey Kingston did not much appreciate the long drive seated with his back to

the person to whom, in his own selfish way, he was gradually becoming attached. But Harold said that the mare was fresh, and that no one could drive her but himself. Coming back, she would be all right, and Geoffrey could take the reins if he liked, but it was essential that they should arrive there in good time and with their flannels unsoiled by a spill!

So Mrs. Maroni went as far as the gate with them, and bade them enjoy themselves, and then returned to the house without any presentiment of the terrible trouble which this day would bring forth.

CHAPTER VIII.

MALLORET DECIDES TO PAY A COUNTRY VISIT.

CAPTAIN MALLORET lost no time in ascertaining in what part of the country Mrs. Maroni had hidden herself. A few days after his interview with her he called at the hotel, and was quite prepared to hear that she had left London. Such a detail, however, was of no importance to him and he had a little story ready which perfectly well answered his purpose. Madame de Tesles had intrusted him with some jewellery to mend, he said, and although she had given him her address in order that he might forward it, he had forgotten it, or lost it, and he would be much obliged if the proprietor of the hotel would write the address on a neat little box (which he produced) and so save him any further trouble.

Madame de Tesles had been a visitor at this hotel for the last ten years, and her country address was perfectly well known to the proprietor and his wife, but still they hesitated. She had made a request, some years ago, that her address should be given to

no one, and Mr. and Mrs. Dawkins remembered this injunction. Noticing their hesitation, Malloret said:

"You will recollect I came here a few days ago with Madame de Tesles, and it was then that she gave me this box and with it her address, but I have either lost it, or else I must have torn it up."

The proprietor remembered him perfectly well, and was so deceived by his nonchalant air, that he overcame his scruples and proceeded to his office, where he wrote the direction on the box. This was all that Malloret desired, and he beat a very speedy retreat when once he had gained the desired knowledge. The moment he was in the street he looked eagerly at the address, and then his face fell.

"'The House,' Pencarvon, Cornwall," he read. "Surely that must be near the Land's End!" he said to himself. "What a God-forsaken place to go to! No wonder she said she lived a long way from London." And then he hurried home anxious to consult an "A B C," and to impart the news of his approaching journey to his amorous landlady. At first he had thought of writing to Mrs. Maroni and renewing his demand for the two hundred pounds, with a hint that if it were not received he might feel compelled to come and fetch it himself. And then he argued that correspondence would very likely be a waste of time and lead to nothing, and that it would be better to present

himself *in propria personâ*, when a refusal would be well-nigh impossible. When the captain reached Clan William Terrace he had finally settled on this latter plan, and was already in high spirits at the certainty of its success.

"I want a railway-guide, Mrs. Potter," he called out loudly, bursting into the parlour, "a 'Bradshaw,' an 'A B C,' anything and everything that will tell me the shortest and most expeditious way to Cornwall."

"Lor, captain, you quite startled me!" said the good widow, who was busily engaged in completing the twins' education and correcting the sums she had given them in the morning.

"Are you going away?" asked Theresa, with a look of mistrust tempered by partial relief.

"Yes, I am," he said sarcastically. "My heart bleeds to have to leave you, my precious Theresa, for even a few days, but the best of friends must part, and for the next week I hope I shall find no cinders in my boots and no kittens in my bed!"

Theresa tossed her head and made no reply.

"When are you coming back?" asked Augustus, lifting his head from the intricacies of dividing £ 769 17s. 10½d. by 19.

"I am coming back when the spirit moves me, and when I have collected the rents with which to pay your

dear and excellent mother all I owe her," answered Malloret, still in capital spirits.

Mrs. Potter smiled. The prospect was a delightful one certainly, and she had perfect faith in its realization; but a sudden doubt chilled her smile as she heard Theresa say, with a meaning that was obvious:

"Are you going to take away your luggage?"

"I could scarcely travel without clothes," he answered airily, "even a convict needs a change sometimes;" and then, "Why are you afraid that I shall never come back?"

"I am not afraid on my own account," said Theresa dryly.

"And you need not be afraid on your mother's," answered Malloret rather crossly. "I am not in the habit of running away from places where I owe money."

"And you are going to Cornwall?" asked Mrs. Potter. "That is a long way off."

"Where is Cornwall?" inquired Augustus, whose geography, like his arithmetic, was somewhat weak.

"I know where it is on the map," said Theresa, proud of her knowledge; "it is quite in the corner, the south-west corner, and right on the sea."

"You know a great deal more than I do then," said Malloret; "but perhaps you will tell me a little more, and find out how long it takes to get to a place

called Pencarvon, and likewise the amount of the first-class fare."

With a very bad grace Theresa complied with this request, and then Malloret, being rather taken aback at finding how much he would have to pay, suddenly became serious and said to Mrs. Potter:

"I am very sorry to leave you, Mrs. Potter, but business must be attended to, as doubtless you very well know, and I hope not to be absent more than a week at the most."

"We shall be very glad to see you back, captain," said Mrs. Potter cheerily.

"Very," echoed Theresa, with a disagreeable inflection in her voice.

Malloret did not reciprocate this sentiment. Humbug as he was, he could not bring himself to say that he should be pleased to see them all again. He fully intended to discharge his debt to Mrs. Potter, or at any rate part of it, if he obtained the money; but after that *Bon soir la compagnie*.

No more Clan William Terrace and odious twins for him until he was again brought to the very direst poverty. He went upstairs and proceeded to pack the remnant of his once handsome wardrobe, and Mrs. Potter continued her course of instruction. But the news had upset them all, and it was not easy to verify sums of compound division and what Augustus called

"subtraction" when your heart was in a flutter and your thoughts elsewhere.

Theresa was the first to throw up the metaphorical sponge.

"I can't do lessons now," she said. "It seems so strange the captain going away."

Augustus followed her suit and threw down his slate with a haggard look of bewilderment, and then inquired of his mother if she thought of allowing her boarder to remove his boxes.

"Of course I do," replied that good lady proudly. "I am not one to pay myself with people's old clothes, and I am sure the captain's wardrobe would go a very little way towards paying me what he owes. I have darned his socks till there is scarcely anything left of them but my own worsted, and there's not a shirt he possesses that does not owe me a pair of cuffs."

"All the more reason, then, that you should retain them," said the violent Theresa. "Mark my words, he'll never come back."

"Theresa, don't say anything so horrible," answered her mother. "I firmly believe that he's going to fetch some money and that I shall be paid in full."

"I wonder why he's going to Cornwall," continued the young lady. "We have never heard him mention it before. His uncle, the earl, lives in Berkshire. I'm sure he's drummed that into our ears often enough."

"Earls often have two or three places in the country," said Augustus sapiently; "there's one in the 'Family Herald' this week that has places in five or six different counties, and a wife hidden in a secret chamber of each."

"You mean 'The Bigamist, or Cursed from his Birth,'" said Theresa revelling in the title. "Yes, I know he has; but I think that one of his wives will turn out to be his mother."

"Very likely," said Augustus. "You are always clever at guessing the end."

"I think I can guess the end of Captain Malloret," said Theresa. "He means to do a skedaddle."

Then Augustus laughed a loud boyish guffaw that irritated his mother more than anything else, and she told them to put away their books and go out for a walk. She must see the captain privately before he left; so when they had both departed she went up to his room, and after having timidly knocked at his door, she peeped in and said:

"Can I help you with your packing, captain?"

She did not wait for the refusal which she knew he would give her, but walked straight into the room and looked with dismay at the chaotic state of his clothes.

"You naughty man, what havoc you play with your things to be sure," she said, beginning to fold up some

coats; and then she added with a sigh, "Ah, and if it were only with your clothes that you played havoc!"

"I think I can get on very well alone," he said, longing to get rid of her. "I am used to packing my own things."

"There is no one like a woman for putting everything in its place," she said, declining to take his hint, and then she stopped, and looking him full in the face she added, "and packing is not the only place where she is indispensable."

"So I believe," he said coldly. "I have always understood that she is indispensable in the kitchen."

"You are right," she answered, not in the least offended by his remark; "many is the dainty little dish I have cooked for you myself, captain, and which you have praised in ignorance of its real author."

"I am sure you are very kind, Mrs. Potter," he said, "you must let me thank you now."

This dogged affection and persistent clinging was very embarrassing. Would she never realize that it was impossible for him to feel anything for her but a common sort of gratitude inspired by her reticence in asking for her bill?

"I do not wish for thanks," she said, "but I should like to ask a favour of you before you leave—a favour which, as a gentleman, I am sure you will not refuse me."

"I will certainly grant it if I can," he answered rather doubtfully, "but if it is to ask me to give you a bill at three months for what I owe you, let me tell you beforehand that it would only be so much waste paper. I shall probably have some ready money next week and then you will be paid."

"You are greatly mistaken in what I mean," she said, with an injured look. "For Heaven's sake don't let us talk about money on the very eve of your departure."

"You are right," he said, at once brightening up, "let us talk upon any other subject but that."

"I want you to give me a solemn promise," said Mrs. Potter. "I want you to promise me upon your word of honour as a gentleman, that you will return to me."

"My dear Mrs. Potter," he answered smiling, "I have already told you that I shall not be away more than ten days. I can't say more."

"It is not for the sake of my little bill," proceeded the widow in a pathetic voice, "but it is because I know that if I were never to see you again I should die!" And then at the thought of so terrible an event she began to cry, and burying her face in her pocket-handkerchief she allowed herself to drop in a mass into a chair which contained all Malloret's clean shirts.

Malloret looked up horrified. He was not prepared

for a scene, and he was furious that his shirt fronts should be made to support the full weight of Mrs. Potter's ample figure.

"Pray don't cry," he said rather crossly. "Of course I am coming back; and, Mrs. Potter, you are sitting on my shirts."

"I can't help it," sobbed the widow, not heeding the latter part of his remark; "my feelings must have a vent, and it's a mercy that tears have come to my relief." With her face still buried in her handkerchief Mrs. Potter put out her hand as if seeking from one of Malloret's a sympathetic squeeze, which she felt would be the only thing to bring her to. Malloret took the plump hand in one of his own and attempted to raise her from amidst the *débris* of his shirts, but the widow had not done with her hysterics, and drawing his hand between both of hers she murmured:

"Captain, do not leave me."

This was becoming intolerable, and Malloret felt that he must put an end to it. Mrs. Potter was swaying herself backwards and forwards in the chair, and he knew that not a single shirt would be fit to be worn by the time she had done crying.

"You are really ridiculous," he said, making another ineffectual effort to get her on her feet. "I never saw anything so perfectly absurd, and pray,

remember, that I am going into a strange country where I have no credit with the washerwoman!"

"If you were to put your arm round my waist I might get up," she sobbed; "but I feel so weak and depressed—in fact, I feel undone."

"I won't put my arm round your waist," he said angrily, at the same time casting away her hand. "If you like to make a fool of yourself I am not going to join you."

Then Mrs. Potter uncovered her face, and drying her eyes, looked up and said:

"You never will understand me. I was born to be misunderstood—and yet we might be so happy."

"I understand you perfectly," he said, with the air of a persecuted heroine who is being made love to against her will; "but if we are to remain friends you must never act again as you have done just now."

"And you *will* come back?"

"I have already told you so twenty times," he answered. "And now what is to be done with these things?" he added, pointing to the heap of crumpled linen, which Mrs. Potter disclosed as she stood up.

"I will run downstairs with them, and give them an iron with my own hands," she said. "Will that please you?" and then, approaching him with a bewitching little smile, "and shall I have no reward?"

Malloret burst out laughing. She looked so ridiculous, standing there with her mouth pursed up, that even, though he felt angry, he was unable to control his merriment.

"You are very absurd," he said, "so absurd that I can't even be angry with you."

"Just one," pleaded Mrs. Potter, with the very archest of smiles.

"Not half a one," roared Malloret, and he flung himself upon his knees and proceeded to cram the things into his portmanteau, while Mrs. Potter withdrew from the room without saying another word.

Next day Malloret left London and ensconced himself in a first-class carriage en route for Pencarvon. He had gathered that it was only a little village containing some four or five hundred souls, and he was wondering what sort of accommodation he would find when he got there. He hoped that his persuasive powers might be sufficient to induce Madame de Tesles to accept him as a guest; but of this he felt doubtful. But he had little anxiety on the subject of the money of which he was in quest, and that, after all, was the principal thing to be considered. Perhaps he would only have to stay there one day or at most two days, and he could put up with a little discomfort for the sake of returning to London with plenty of money in his pocket. His thoughts on the whole were not un-

pleasant ones, and he even found time to appreciate the beauty of the scenery and the refreshing look of the country, which was very welcome to him after the long months he had spent in Clan William Terrace.

He arrived at Pencarvon in due course of time and ascertained that the Station Hotel was an establishment capable of providing every comfort. If it did not possess the luxuries of a West End hotel it was, at any rate, clean and homely, and its host was ready to give him every information respecting the neighbourhood.

“Oh, yes, he knew Mrs. Maroni, the lady at ‘The House,’ and a very nice lady she was too, always doing some good in the village and keeping herself to herself. Some of the parties thereabouts complained that she did so too much and was stuck-up like—still, that wasn’t his opinion. She had stayed in his house for a month when she first came to the country and there wasn’t a sweeter lady to be met with anywheres, and as for her son and daughter, they were just as pleasant as their mother, and he couldn’t say more.”

All this was told Malloret as he was eating his dinner, in answer to many artfully put questions; and then, when the repast had come to an end, Malloret announced his intention of going out for a stroll and he wandered in the direction of “The House” to take a good look at Mrs. Maroni’s home. He determined

that he would call upon her the next day as an ordinary visitor. There should be no preliminary letter to put her on her guard; and then, if she were alone, he would make his demand, and, if not, he could do so by correspondence. He was pleased with the look of the house—it was a fine building, and all the surroundings spoke of wealth. The grounds were well kept and he could hear merry voices in the distance, laughing and talking at their final game of lawn tennis in the dying twilight.

Why should they all be happy and careless of the world's sorrow when he himself was cursed by poverty and all its attendant miseries. Their gaiety almost made him desperate and long to plunge into their very midst and tell them whence came the money which gave them their present enjoyment.

But he controlled himself and said, "No, to-morrow will do. They may laugh to-day and cry to-morrow!" And then he turned on his heel and walked back to the hotel.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GARDEN PARTY.

WHEN the Maroni party arrived at the Perrys', they found that they were almost the latest comers. Geoffrey Kingston was glad of this; he did not care about lawn tennis, and he was perfectly well aware that he would be bored to death before the day came to an end, but Harold and Alice were all eagerness to begin, and were the first to suggest that the draw should at once take place. They were both good players, and hoped to be returned winners at the end of the day if they had luck and could manage to get drawn together; and, if not, then one of them must win and thus support the reputation of the family.

A mild air of animation reigned on the terrace overlooking the tennis ground, and it was evident that the young men and maidens who were about to display their prowess considered it a most exciting event. They hurried backwards and forwards making eager inquiries of each other.

"Who have you been drawn with?" "You know I have hurt my hand." "I can never play when any one

is looking at me." "How do you like my dress?" "Who is that good-looking man with the Maronis? Does he play well?" and so forth.

There were two daughters of the house, pretty blondes with amiable faces, who were busy arranging setts, endeavouring to make everything agreeable all round. Some of the county big-wigs were very exclusive and objected to their offspring playing with people of whom they knew nothing, and there were old ladies who declared that the sun was blinding them, and others who said that the wind was very chilly and that they must have their shawls brought to them. The Perry girls were equal to all these and other demands; they were accustomed to these large gatherings and enjoyed the fun of them. They were thoroughly good-natured people, not very refined perhaps, and their one ambition seemed to be that all should amuse themselves as much as possible.

Kingston looked on with a mild sort of contempt, and he said to Alice, whose side he scarcely ever left, "It is a kind of world's fair—everybody talking and laughing at the same time."

"It is a very pretty scene, is it not?" she answered simply.

"It is a very noisy one," said he.

"The Perry girls have always plenty to say for themselves," she said.

"Yes, they look like the proverbial cat on hot bricks."

"You are very unkind, when they are doing their best to entertain us all. Do you think them pretty?"

"Not so pretty as some one else here," he answered, with an admiring glance at her own fresh face.

"Harold admires them very much," she said, ignoring his remark.

"Them? Do you mean to say that he is in love with them both?"

"I don't know about being in love—you are always talking of love, Mr. Kingston. I think if Harold has a preference, it is for the elder one, Marian."

"If I am always talking of love, it is because it is uppermost in my mind, I suppose. Do you know that a man can't get on without love?" he said.

"I don't know anything about it. I suppose Harold will fall in love some day, but I shall be very sorry when he does."

"Why do you always talk about your brother? Why not talk about yourself?"

"Because I have always heard that it was very selfish and ill-bred to do so," she answered, smiling.

"Then be selfish and ill-bred to please me," he said.

"I think the Perrys are a more interesting subject," she said guardedly. "They are pretty girls, they go to

London every year, and can talk about everything that is going on, and they are also heiresses. They must be more interesting than I."

"Are they heiresses?" he said, with a languid air of interest.

"Yes; there are no sons, and they will inherit all this property."

"Then they will soon find husbands," was his answer.

"They may not care to find them," said she. "They will probably mistrust all mankind. In fact, one day the elder one told me so. She said that they had quantities of proposals in London, but they all came from penniless younger sons who wanted to improve their positions."

"They are evidently worldly-wise already," said he, "and wish to be loved for their own sweet sakes. Well; it will be difficult to find a husband in these degenerate days who is perfectly disinterested."

"And yet how abominable the man must be who would only marry for money," said Alice.

"Yes, I suppose so," he answered lazily.

In the meantime, while this conversation was taking place, Harold was paying his court to the elder Miss Perry. They already had a kindling of affection for each other, which required but little fanning to develop into a veritable flame. Miss Perry liked his boyish,

frank nature, and felt sure that if he admired her it was not for *les beaux yeux de sa cassette*. He liked her because he was bound, at his age, to fasten his early affections on some one, and Miss Perry was about the only young lady with whom he had been thrown into contact. Thus, then, their love was not very idyllic, but it might later on develop into genuine passion if the circumstances presented themselves. Harold and Marian had drawn together in the tournament, and so far fate had been propitious to them, and they found many little opportunities of saying those soft "nothings" which are the forerunners of more serious flirtation.

The Perrys were wealthy, but the source of their wealth was not very pure. Indeed it sprang from rum, which is doubtless a comforting and sustaining beverage, but which has caused more drunkenness among our noble tars than probably any drink extant. In these days of what may be conventionally called "social democracy," the profession of a rum distiller is rather looked up to than otherwise, and the Perrys had most doors open to them both in London and in the country. A well-known duchess offered them her visiting list and invited people to their balls, and the result was that they somehow found themselves the very cream of fashionable society. It, however, behoved the Perry parents to be very careful in the selection of husbands for their daughters, and thus it came about

that they agreed that birth must be a *sine quâ non*, even if not accompanied by wealth. Mrs. Maroni's surroundings were too obscure and mysterious to permit them to think seriously of her son as a future husband for their darling Marian. Young Maroni was certainly a gentleman, and had received a gentleman's education, moreover he was good-looking and pleasant in himself, but still there was never any mention made of Maroni *père*, and pedigree was what they desired above all things. On this particular day, therefore, Mrs. Perry did not view with any satisfaction the innocent flirtation which was being carried on under her very eyes, and that excellent lady was very glad when the game came to an end. As fate would have it, however, Harold Maroni was successful in each of the setts he played, and therefore he was bound to continue playing with his partner until they had vanquished all their adversaries. Then, when they were finally declared the winners, there was a great scene of congratulation and triumph. They were besieged on all sides with compliments and praise—some hearty enough, others into which entered a little of the spite of the disappointed player. In some minds there is a substratum of envy, hatred, and malice and all uncharitableness. This must always be so as long as original sin remains in the world. The famous divine was not far wrong, who told the lady who asked him what his

opinion was of original sin, in more emphatic language than we care to repeat, that we should be a good deal better without it.

Marian Perry was delighted with her success. It was, perhaps, not very well-bred to display such genuine satisfaction in the face of her defeated guests, but she found it very difficult to conceal her pride. Then, too, she was pleased that Harold Maroni should have been her partner. It weaved another link between them in their growing affection for each other, and Harold had a sort of involuntary feeling that he should like these congratulations to be applied to his engagement with her. Perhaps some day there would be a renewal of this scene if ever he was fortunate enough to win her. He was roused from these reflections by the sudden announcement being made that they must all adjourn indoors for a dance. There were soon some twenty couples whirling around the old oak hall and the Perry girls were more animated and gushing than ever. They were indefatigable in seeing that every Jack had his Jill, and they would not dance a step themselves until they saw their friends properly coupled off.

Kingston and Alice were sitting apart in a corner looking sentimental and absorbed and taking no part in the dance, when the younger Perry girl came up to

them and said "This is not 'puss in the corner,' you know! Why are you not dancing?"

Alice blushed and stammered out an excuse that she was tired.

"Miss Maroni is tired, and I dislike dancing," said Kingston, "so we could think of nothing better than retiring to this extremely comfortable corner. Please do not turn us out."

"You may stay here for this dance," said Julia Perry, "but after that it will be wanted by other couples. As you say, it is extremely comfortable, and I can't allow you to monopolize it all the evening." And with a smile full of meaning she went back to the dancers.

CHAPTER X.

HEARTS ARE TRUMPS.

KINGSTON and Alice were perfectly happy, and the former declared as soon as Miss Perry was out of hearing that for his part he failed to understand people who did not allow others to enjoy themselves in their own way. He had been openly telling Alice that he loved her. He knew that such an excellent opportunity as the present one would probably never occur again during his stay in Cornwall, so he determined to make the most of it. And yet he scarcely knew himself if the words he said were true. Of course he liked Alice with the selfish, lazy liking that is born of easy conquest. He could see she cared for him and would be very willing to listen to his declaration. So it was quite as much out of good-nature and a certain feeling of gratitude as of anything else that he made it. He never thought of marriage; he knew that he was too poor to indulge in such a luxury, and that no parents of a girl who had money would look upon him with favour. Still, it was pleasant to see the colour mount to Alice's cheek, and her eyes sparkle with delight as

he told her unreservedly that he loved her. It was much the same kind of wooing that her mother had undergone twenty years ago at Cairo—a wooing which had ended in blighting her life. But Alice knew nothing of the world, she believed her lover's pleadings to be true and genuine just as her mother had done before her. It all seemed strange and wonderful to her, brought up as she had been in such absolute seclusion and knowing only a mother's and a brother's love. There was no need for Geoffrey Kingston to feel any anxiety as to the result of his wooing. Alice's hand trembled in his and her embarrassed silence was sufficient to show him that he had gained her heart, and that she was his whenever he chose to claim her. Young Mr. Kingston could make love as well as any man—better than most Englishmen, whose forte it is not altogether considered. He was tender, yet passionate and manly, and he heightened the effect of his love pleadings by an occasional note of despair which was brought in with much cleverness and tact.

Alice sat there enraptured. She had never heard such beautiful language, for so she considered his easy fluency. It was very charming to be told by this good-looking young man that he had needed the sight of her sweet face to open his heart. She sat there drinking in his words with avidity, believing all he said, and, indeed, encouraging him to every sort of exaggeration.

An end must come to all things, however, and a final rout from the Misses Perry at length brought their tête-à-tête to an end. Alice was covered with confusion as she was asked to join the dancers, and Kingston rose with a sigh and leant up against the wall in an attitude of excessive boredom and despair. Harold was too much engaged on his own account to notice the flirtation in which his sister had been indulging. He was enjoying himself thoroughly and honestly, and had made himself supremely happy by one or two dances with Marian Perry. His love-making was awkward and boyish and took the form of involved metaphors which were supposed to be very complimentary to the person to whom they were addressed. But, at any rate, he was sincere, and Marian, who had had much experience of London suitors, knew that he was so. Still he was very young—not yet one-and-twenty—nor had he at present any profession, and she was perfectly well aware that her parents were as particular on this point as they were on the subject of birth.

During a few moments' pause that took place while they were together, Marian said to him:

"Why is your mother so unwilling to let Alice go to parties? I can't tell you what trouble we had to gain her consent to let your sister come to us to-day."

"My mother thinks that Alice has plenty of time

before her, I suppose," he answered. "Some day or other she will come out in London."

"Have you any relations in London?" asked Miss Perry.

"I don't think we have relations anywhere," he said smiling. "I think the few we ever had have died, with the single exception of my grandmother."

"And she lives in London?"

"Yes," answered Harold rather doubtfully. His grandmother had always been associated with a certain mystery in his mind and he felt incapable of enlarging upon her existence.

"It seems so strange to have no relations," said Miss Perry, who was not pumping him out of curiosity but from genuine interest which he had inspired.

"If ever I marry," said Harold, getting very red at the mere possibility of such an event, "I should be so much in love with—the person with whom I was in love—that I should not care the least bit whether she had any relations or not." He meant this as magnanimity on his part respecting the rum-selling antecedents of Miss Perry's parents.

"You would have to be very much in love then," said Marian, carefully studying her fan.

"I certainly cannot understand marriage without great—without overpowering—love. A man must love a woman as his very life to marry her."

"You have evidently been reading the marriage service," said Marian flippantly, "I believe there are sentiments like that to be found in it."

"No, I assure you I have not," he answered quite earnestly, "they are my own sentiments inspired by the person who——"

"Yes? Who?"

"Who I was going to say I feel I could love if ever I had any encouragement to do so."

"You are getting quite beyond me," said Miss Perry, with a nervous little laugh. "Of course you must have encouragement before you can love."

"I have had none as yet," he answered rather dolefully.

"Which evidently means that you do not yet love," she said with provoking coyness.

"I do love—that is to say I could love if——"

"You are conjugating the whole verb, Mr. Maroni," she said in a pleased little tone, "I should love, I could love, I do love—how many more tenses will you wander into?"

"I am afraid I am rather incoherent," he admitted, "and I dare say you are laughing at me."

"No, I am not," she answered, "but I think we have said enough on the subject; let us talk of something else." So Harold was cut short in the very midst of his rambling outbursts and he answered at random

about people and things in whom he took not the slightest interest.

Later on in the evening it began to dawn upon Mr. Maroni that he was acting as chaperon to his sister, and that it was some time since he had seen anything of her, so he made some inquiries of the other dancers, who were all in total ignorance of her whereabouts. They had seen her in the tea-room about half-an-hour ago with Maroni's friend, and that was all the information he could gather. Harold then began a search for her which was unsuccessful and it was some considerable time after, when he had given his search up as fruitless, that his sister approached him with very flushed cheeks and asked him if it were not time to go.

"Where have you been, Alice?" he asked. "I have been looking for you everywhere."

"I have been wandering about the grounds," Alice answered carelessly. "I felt too tired to dance, and preferred talking, and as Mr. Kingston was of my opinion, I have been spending the greater part of the evening with him."

Harold had too great a love and respect for his sister to even suggest that she had done wrong, and yet he had a vague idea that Alice's explanation was not altogether satisfactory. He considered his mother and Alice absolutely faultless, and he would not for one moment have questioned anything that they did;

but still a young lady's prolonged absence with a man is apt to strike the dullest comprehension as a little peculiar.

"As you are tired we will go home," he said, "although for myself I should like to stay much longer, and no one seems inclined to go yet."

"I am not tired now," she answered, "and I do not wish you to leave on my account. I am going to dance if any one will ask me." She was quite happy herself, and prepared to do anything to make her brother so.

Geoffrey had told her that he loved her over and over again, and she had let him know that his love was reciprocated. Vows of eternal constancy had been exchanged, and these two had sworn never to belong to any one but each other. And they had certainly made the most of that hour during which they were absent from the dancers.

Alice was in high spirits, and she infused much life into the final dances. Altogether it was a delightful day for them all, and they returned to "The House" much pleased with the expedition. Mrs. Maroni was sitting up to receive them, and she appeared unusually excited and unlike herself. She was nervous and talked quickly, evidently anxious to hide her own thoughts or to distract them by hearing all about the party.

Both Alice and Harold noticed this, and they could see that their mother had been crying.

"What is the matter, mother?" asked Harold. "You don't seem quite well."

"I am all right," she said nervously, "but I think I got frightened at sitting alone for so long—the house seemed so still, and I had a sort of panic of burglars." And then they both kissed her and declared that it was very good of her to sit up, and that she should never be left alone again.

Mrs. Maroni turned away and brushed aside an involuntary tear which her children's tenderness had invoked, and then she collected herself and said as naturally as she could:

"By the bye, I have not been alone all day. I have had a visitor."

And then they were eager to know all particulars. The advent of a visitor at "The House" was such a very unusual event.

"It was a gentleman," said Mrs. Maroni. "A friend of your father's whom I had not seen for years. Curiously enough, he is staying at Pencarvon, and I have asked him to dinner to-morrow, so you will be able to see him."

This was indeed news to them. A friend of their father! It sounded delicious. They would hear something about old times now, and if once Mrs. Maroni

broke through the ice by receiving a man to dinner, other festivities might perhaps follow. And then Mrs. Maroni turned to Geoffrey Kingston and said she hoped he had enjoyed himself. That astute young gentleman had been watching his hostess narrowly during all the time she had been speaking of her visitor, and he had gathered that the visit was not an altogether pleasant one.

"I have enjoyed myself immensely," he said, with a not altogether pleasant smile. "I love lawn-tennis, and I love"—and then he paused and looked at Alice—"dancing."

"Geoffrey has been horribly lazy all day," said Harold; "we are never going to take him to another party."

"Seriously speaking," said Mr. Kingston, "I believe you have had the best of it, Mrs. Maroni. You have had no fatigue, and you have had a visitor to amuse you."

With this doubtful speech the little party broke up and retired to their respective rooms, Alice and Harold to dream of undying love and sincere affection and eternal honeymoons, and, indeed, every kind of future bliss that exists in lovers' imagination, and Mrs. Maroni to lie awake all night racked with the torment of approaching *chantage*.

CHAPTER XI.

BLACK-MAIL.

It may now, perhaps, be best to briefly state what had happened at "The House" during the young people's absence. Events had taken place which would certainly account for Mrs. Maroni's unsettled state of mind. As soon as she had seen them off, Mrs. Maroni went indoors and gave herself up to a quiet afternoon's reading. It was her habit constantly to secure a fresh supply of books from Paris, and, indeed, every form of literature—English and French—was to be found in her library. On this particular afternoon, however, it seemed impossible for her to fix her attention upon the book before her. Her mind kept wandering, first of all to past days—days that were altogether so different to her present life—and then she became uneasy about Harold and Alice. Suppose anything should happen to them. The mare might bolt and break their necks. A feeling came over her which she could not control, and for which she was unable to account, that there was "trouble in the air," and she had a vague presentiment of approaching evil. She put down her book

and closed her eyes, hoping that perhaps sleep might come to her, and that she would wake up in a healthier state of mind. But sleep did not come, and as the afternoon became cooler she determined to go out and endeavour to distract her thoughts by a turn in the garden. As she was leaving the room the servant entered and handed her Captain Malloret's card. She glanced at it with dazed bewilderment, and then, when she had sufficiently become mistress of herself, she inquired if the servant had told the gentleman that she was at home. He replied in the affirmative, and then she hesitated and scarcely knew what to say. She felt inclined to refuse Malloret admittance, and so let him see, once for all, that she would not be persecuted by him, and that there was nothing to be hoped for from her; but this feeling lasted but for a minute. She was perfectly well aware that she was dealing with a desperate man, and she dared not defy him. Eventually her fears got the better of her, and she told the servant to show him in. After all, it would be as well to see him and send him away at once. She would tell him, in no undecided terms, that as long as he remained at Pencarvon, he should never receive a penny from her, but that if he went away she might perhaps grant him the loan he desired, or, at any rate, a portion of it.

In the midst of these thoughts the door opened and

Mallorete entered. He came forward to her with an amused smile on his face, and said:

"You didn't think we should meet so soon when last we parted."

"I had hoped not," she said coldly.

"What a very ungracious welcome!" he laughed, "and what a charming place you have here. Do you know, that although I have travelled all over the world, this is my first visit to Cornwall?"

"I hope it will be your last," she said, still standing in the middle of the room, and not asking him to take a seat.

"Well, I am not so sure. I found the country charming, so picturesque and all that sort of thing. The coast, too, is so rugged, and unlike the conventional cliffs that one sees in the south of England. The people are rather boorish, and their *patois* is quite beyond me at present, but I daresay I shall get accustomed to it in time."

"Are you going to stay here long?" she asked. "Why did you come?"

"I will answer your questions categorically. It is my intention to stay just as long as I find the place does not bore me; and I came partly to explore an unknown country, and partly to have the pleasure of seeing you."

"How did you find out where I live?"

"By the merest accident—one of those delightful trifles which are sufficient sometimes to change a man's whole life."

"That is no answer to my question. Who told you I lived at Pencarvon?"

"No one told me; I found it out for myself."

"You watched me and followed me, I suppose. Have you added the profession of detective to your other accomplishments?"

He laughed again. "No. I am afraid I should make a very bad one. I am too lazy and indifferent. I am sure I could not discover a clue, and certainly not follow it up if my life depended upon it."

"It is a pity you are not too lazy to undertake such a long journey," she said, "especially as it must be an utterly fruitless one so far as I am concerned."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I am not going into particulars, but I may as well tell you at once that if you came here to renew your demand for two hundred pounds, your errand will not be successful."

"Not successful?"

"I will not give you a shilling while you remain in this neighbourhood."

"Thanks. You are very kind, but at present I have no intention of borrowing a shilling from you," he said flippantly. "About the other sum we can talk pre-

sently. Won't you give me something to drink? Some tea—or some claret cup I should prefer—if you have any. I must say you are, without exception, the most inhospitable person I ever met. I suppose you don't grudge food to your friends?"

She made no answer, and he seated himself in the most comfortable chair he could find in the room, and then he turned round and said:

"Shall I ring?"

"What for?" asked Mrs. Maroni.

"For that drink that I am longing for. I am sure that you have some ice in the house, and that your excellent butler will be able to concoct me something cool and refreshing."

Mrs. Maroni was furious. Evidently Captain Malloret was not to be lightly dealt with. Indeed it would be useless to attempt to defy him in his present mood. Clearly she must allow him to remain, and have a serious conversation with him. It was too terrible to think that he held her life's happiness and that of her children literally in the palm of his hand, and that he had it in his power to blast them at any moment. It was a mercy that she had been alone when he arrived. Now she hoped that if she was firm she might induce him to leave before they came back, and that they need never know of his visit.

"You may ring," she said more amiably. "I dare say they will get you something."

"Ah! that's more like your own sweet self," he said. "We can carouse together, as in the good old Cairo days."

"I am not in a carousing humour," said Mrs. Maroni curtly. "I was just going to have my tea."

"Your five o'clock tea, I suppose. Will you believe that in Clan William Terrace they dine in the middle of the day sometimes and then have what they call a 'meat tea' at about seven. Can you see me enjoying a 'meat tea' with a Bayswater widow?"

"I pity your Bayswater widow," she said.

"Because I owe her a little money? Then you should have lent me what I asked you for in London, and I would have paid her."

"I have nothing to do with your bills," she began, and then the servant came in and she could not conclude her remark.

Malloret took up the novel she had been reading, and said:

"'Une Lune de Miel à Monte Carlo,' by Adolphe Belot. That is where you spent your honeymoon, was it not, or at least one of them."

"I never had a honeymoon," she answered shortly.

"No? How curious. Ah! I am forgetting the commonest usages of society all this time; I have never asked after your children. How are they?"

"They are quite well."

"I hope I shall see them."

"They are spending the day with some friends some distance from here. I am very glad that it happened to be the day on which you called."

"Why should I not see them? I am really quite anxious to make their acquaintance."

"And I am equally anxious that you should not do so."

"You are dreadfully impolite, and you decidedly take the advantage of my good temper. And what shocking stories you told me in London. You said that you knew none of your neighbours, and that you never went into society, and now I find that your son and daughter have gone to one of the largest parties of the year, given by the Perrys—gin distillers, are not they?"

"Who told you?"

"My landlord. He knows everything that goes on here. He's a most invaluable old gossip."

"I told you I went into no society, and I told you the truth. You see I have stayed at home."

"Then you really have given up 'the world, the flesh and the devil.'"

"I have given up the two former. The last I am afraid is in the room at the present moment."

Mallorete looked round as if seeking for his Satanic Majesty, and then said laughingly:

"You can't mean me? I have got no cloven foot."

"I am in no humour for jesting," she said impatiently. "You must tell me what it is you want, and then you must go."

"You are quite right to be frank," he said, "and as you say, we are only wasting our time in playful badinage. After all, there is nothing like coming to the point. I want you to lend me two hundred pounds. Now that's clear enough, is it not?"

"It is remarkably clear, but you seem to forget that I have already refused to lend it to you."

"No, I do not. But I am not one of those people who are accustomed to take no for an answer, when they prefer an answer in the affirmative. Besides, you were in London when you refused my request. I thought that perhaps you might be more amiable here."

"Why should I be?"

"Oh, I don't know. If you can't guess, it is scarcely worth my while to tell you. What I thought was that one good turn deserved another."

"And what good turn have I ever received from you?"

"None—as yet. But if I hold my tongue, you might be grateful to me."

"In plain English, it is black-mail you require."

"Black-mail is rather an ugly word."

"Ugly deeds require ugly names."

"Well, we will not argue about the name. Will you lend it to me?"

"No, I will not. I have already refused you, and I have no reason to give you money which I know you can never return. With regard to your threat, I cannot seriously entertain it. I knew you years ago as a gentleman. You bore a good name, and you have held a commission in the Queen's service. It is impossible for me to believe that you have suddenly become so low a blackguard as to threaten a woman, and extort money from her on the strength of knowing her miserable antecedents. Be a man, Captain Malloret, and think of your honour and self-respect. It would be better for you to sweep a crossing than to expect money from me."

"Your moralizing is delightful, but your arguments will not hold water. If the source of your money is impure, and you are disposed to sermonize, you should have no objection to parting with it. We will talk no more about a loan. Give it to me as a charity."

"I can see you are hopeless," she said, "and it is useless to waste words upon you." Then suddenly, "If I gave you this money, what guarantee should I

have that your demands would cease? None whatever. On the contrary, you would become more importunate and I should never have a moment's peace. It is better that you should know once for all that there is nothing to be hoped for from me."

"If you give me this two hundred pounds, I will give you my solemn word of honour——"

"That would be even less valuable than an I O U, or the bill you spoke of the other day," she interrupted. "The honour of a man who can threaten a woman with exposure is very doubtful security."

"I have given you the right to say so by my hasty words just now," he said in a conciliatory voice, "but I would swear by everything I hold most sacred that I would never trouble you again if you gave me this money."

"But do you hold anything sacred?"

He hesitated, and tried to think of some binding oath that would convince her, but in his bad, worthless existence he could think of nothing for which he cared sufficiently to render such a promise safe.

"No, no," she persisted. "I should be a fool to give you the two hundred pounds. I should never be free of you if once you thought you could extort money from me."

"As you like," he said rather impatiently. "You have everything to gain by granting my request, but if it is to be war to the knife, it must be so. I think you will regret it more than I shall."

CHAPTER XII.

MALLORET PERSISTENT.

MRS. MARONI awoke the next morning with a dread recollection of the hateful interview which she had undergone upon the previous day. It was maddening to think that this man, who had no sort of hold upon her, to whom she was not indebted for anything in the world, and with whom she had not been mixed up in any kind of way, should nevertheless have it in his power to wreck her and her children's happiness. There was much to be considered before she saw him again. She must try and bind him down to some compact by which she should be free of him in the future, but she felt the difficulty of this and indeed of the hopelessness of ever getting out of the rascal's grasp.

All the morning she remained in her room, racking her brains in the vain endeavour to think of some plan which would free her from Captain Malloret and his diabolical schemes. A promise, however sacred, would be only so many empty words in the mouth of a man who could take advantage of her position and threaten

her as he had done. There was obviously but one path open to her, and that was flight; her home must be broken up, and the years she had spent in self-sacrificing seclusion, must count as nothing. It was very hard, and yet, in all her trouble she recognized a kind of grim justice and relentless reward for the life she had once led. She began to think how difficult it would be to find a spot where Captain Malloret would not, sooner or later, succeed in hunting her down, and now that he could become acquainted with her mode of life and surroundings, and could ascertain that Harold was at Cambridge, it would always be an easy matter for him to find clues as to her whereabouts. She sat down and wrote a long letter to de Tesles, telling him exactly what had taken place, and asking for his advice. She had considerable confidence in his judgment, for she knew him to be a clever man of the world, and she trusted that he might be able to discover some way out of her difficulty. After she had sent off the letter, she felt a certain sense of relief, and went downstairs and joined the young people. Fortunately they were too much occupied in discussing the events of the party of the day before, to ask her any further questions concerning the visitor she had received, and she found a welcome distraction in listening to their descriptions of the various people they had met at the Perrys'.

During a portion of the morning Harold had been out and Kingston and Alice had enjoyed the delightful tête-à-tête in which they had repeated their vows of the previous day. And Alice wished to know if she might tell her mother of his proposal, or if he would prefer to do so himself; but the young man strongly objected to any mention being made of it. He must announce it to his own family first, he said, and see what they would do for him. In his present position he was totally unable to marry, but he would promise to be true to her, if—and on this score he did not doubt her for a single instant—she would only be true to him. He must return to Cambridge for his last term, and then, when he had consulted with his relations, Alice would be free to announce her engagement.

Alice was not unnaturally disappointed, and her face showed that she was so plainly enough, but a kiss from her lover soon dispelled the feeling, and, like all girls of her age, she had implicit faith in her first love. She was so proud of him, so proud of herself for having won the love of a man who appeared indifferent to everything and everybody. She would have liked to proclaim her triumph from the house-tops, but after what Kingston had explained to her, she realized that this was impossible, and sweetly assented to his proposed plan.

And then her mother came down, and the delightful interview was cut short.

Kingston was more than ever interested in Mrs. Maroni. His early suspicions of everything not being quite right in her past life, had received striking confirmation from her troubled appearance of the evening before, and the young man was looking forward to the presence of a visitor at dinner to gather something a little more definite concerning her.

Mrs. Maroni, however, was much more composed this morning. She had wonderful self-control, and she appeared to take a lively interest in the conversation respecting the lawn tennis party. Nevertheless, she was still thinking of the dreadful ordeal that awaited her. Her mind having this new trouble to dwell upon, she forgot, for the time being, her dislike to Mr. Kingston's presence, and the fact that he was unduly flirting with her daughter. For a moment she had thought vaguely of throwing herself upon his mercy and explaining to him her cruel position, and asking him for his assistance to enable her to deal with Captain Malloret. She needed the help of a man, and he was evidently no ordinary young man, but one who could easily enter into the difficulties of the situation. He had often spoken seriously and cleverly to her, and had a knowledge of the world considerably in advance of his age, but she

revolted at the idea of having to confess to him that she had never been married, and she also had a shrewd notion that his interference would only make Malloret more desperate and revengeful. All day long she was attempting to think of some solution of the difficulty, but was unable to find any. As soon as an idea struck her, she dismissed it as impracticable, and when Malloret arrived she had come to no definite decision.

They were still in the drawing-room when he was announced and Mrs. Maroni went forward to 'greet him with a forced smile of welcome. Malloret was positively beaming, and endeavoured to make himself as amusing and agreeable as possible. The young Maronis thought him delightful; he had so much to say for himself, and he said it so funnily; but Kingston looked beneath the surface, and put him down at once as an adventurer. The occasional glances of distrust and desire for approbation, which he directed to Mrs. Maroni were not lost upon Kingston, and he admired the *sang froid* and apparent indifference with which that lady received them. Malloret told them his regimental stories, properly diluted, for the benefit of a family party, and indeed did his utmost to make them laugh and put them in a good humour.

Presently Kingston looked at him and said:

"You must have left the army very young. Did you get tired of it?"

"Yes, I did," said Malloret, who was not altogether so pleased. "Being a soldier is very much like being at school, and when I arrived at the age of thirty, I felt that I had had enough of it. I love my Queen and country as much as any man, and I would do anything I could to serve them, but really, having to get up at monstrous hours when you would much rather be in bed, and having to ask for permission every time you want a 'day out,' is very like school with the colonel for head master and the other field officers as ushers."

This speech was certainly not a happy one. No one seemed to like it, and Malloret, seeing the effect it had produced, instantly directed attention from himself by asking Harold what profession he had decided to adopt.

Harold declared that at present his tastes seemed to lay in the direction of the law, and that he intended to be called to the Bar as soon as possible after he had left the university.

"The worst of being a barrister is that you have to tell so many lies," said Malloret. And he again turned his glance in the direction of Mrs. Maroni.

"Then I am sure Harold would not succeed," said Alice; "he is truth personified."

"I hope we all are," said Malloret boldly; "but of course there are so many fibs that are absolute necessities, that, after all, I suppose it does not much matter

whether one tells them in a professional way or merely in every-day social intercourse."

"Harold's profession is quite undecided," said Mrs. Maroni. "He has occasionally thought of the Indian Civil Service." And the idea occurred to her that it would perhaps be a mercy if he went to a far off country where he would, anyhow, be safely out of the way of Malloret's slanderous tongue.

"It is a very difficult examination to get through," said Malloret, "but I dare say that your son is clever enough to pass it—especially if he inherits any of your marvellous talents."

Mrs. Maroni frowned.

"We have lived so long out of the world," she said coldly, "that we are quite unaccustomed to compliments; frankly speaking, we do not like them."

Malloret felt snubbed, and retorted by saying:

"You surely can't forget all the compliments you have received, even if you have lived in a 'Palace of Truth' for the last ten years."

"They are very easily forgotten," said Mrs. Maroni, and then the conversation took another turn.

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. MARONI CAPITULATES.

AFTER dinner Mrs. Maroni said she would show Captain Malloret round the grounds while the young people repaired to their eternal lawn tennis. Kingston felt rather in the way. He knew he was not wanted in the tête-à-tête which Mrs. Maroni sought, and so he said he had letters to write and would go to his room.

"There is not much to show you," said Mrs. Maroni to Malloret, "and this is not a show place, but you must see my prize bantams and my highly bred pigs."

So they started off together, and, as soon as they were out of hearing, Malloret said:

"Fancy your winding up your brilliant career with prize bantams and over fed pigs! I must say that the idea is as amusing as it is astonishing."

"It is unusual, is it not?" she said. "I suppose you think I ought to have died in the gutter, or ended my days at a roulette table at Monte Carlo!"

"Heaven forbid!" he said piously. "But I had no idea that you could take any interest in animals. I should have thought you were too clever."

"I suppose it is after a life study of human beings and beasts that I have come to the conclusion that I prefer the latter," she said. "A pig is certainly less spiteful and unprincipled than a man."

"These delightful epithets are meant for me, I presume."

"They are, and I am glad that you recognize the description; but at the same time I know you now sufficiently well to be perfectly aware that they can have no effect upon you."

And then she turned suddenly to him and said:

"What guarantee am I to receive that if I give you this money you will not renew your importunities?"

"I am afraid my word is not sufficient."

"No, it is not," she answered briefly.

"Then I scarcely see what else I can do to restore your confidence. I can only pledge my honour—everything else I ever possessed is pledged long ago."

"You must sign a paper," she said, "acknowledging the sum you have received and undertaking never to molest me again."

"I might sign fifty papers, and I will if you like, but none of them would be of the slightest value. After all, I can assure you, you have a most mistaken view of my character. I am not a villain in a transpontine play. You told me yourself last night that I was a gentleman. I only asked for this money as a

loan, and it was your obstinacy which made me say the rude things I did. Two hundred pounds will quite put me on my legs, and I shall be able to turn round and look about for something to do. You can't seriously suppose that I am going to exist all my life on blackmailing a woman, can you?"

His words were reassuring. Ah, if she could only believe them! Perhaps he was genuine; she tried to think that it was so, and to make herself believe that, after all, she had mistaken his character and exaggerated her own trouble. Anyhow, his speech certainly relieved her mind, and she spoke more kindly to him, making a final appeal to any good feeling that he might still possess.

"I hope you are speaking the truth," she said, "and I am willing to believe you. Of course, when a man is very hard up he often says and does things which he probably regrets afterwards. If this money can be of any service to you, I shall be very glad, and I give it to you willingly, without any idea of ever seeing it again. I was perhaps silly to make such a fuss about it, and you must forgive me the unkind things I have said to you. After all, it is a miserable kind of philosophy to have no faith in any one. But I have scarcely ever seen anything but the dark side of the world, and I am therefore apt to judge too hastily and harshly. We will say no more disagreeable things

to each other, and when you leave here I will wish you good luck and a brighter future."

Her manner was altogether kind and genuine, and it had a certain effect upon Malloret. He had never thought of persecuting her perpetually. He lived from day to day, and was not in the habit of considering the future. It was enough for him that Mrs. Maroni would give him the money he wanted, and he was pleased at the gracious way in which she did it.

"You have made a very diplomatic speech," he said, "and, unlike most diplomatic speeches, there is heart and kindness in it. I am glad you don't look upon me as an utter ruffian, and I am awfully obliged to you for the service you are rendering me. I hope some day I shall be able to repay you—I can't say more."

So Mrs. Maroni was content, and proceeded to show him the pigs and the poultry in a much happier frame of mind than she had anticipated. It was so comforting, after a period of mental torture, to be able to lull herself into a feeling of security. Malloret might not have been touched at her speech, and he might still plot to work her ruin, but she would not look on that dark side. She would believe what he had said and enjoy the comfort of his words. She told him that he should have the money the next day and that he might come and fetch it in the afternoon; and

then he expressed more gratitude, and did not interrupt him as she had done on the previous evening, but, on the contrary she drank in his words with eager thankfulness. Then they talked on indifferent subjects, and Malloret admired all she had to show him.

“How happy I could be in the country,” he declared, with a sudden burst of enthusiasm. “Far away from duns, and friends who cut one, and Mrs. Potter, my landlady.”

“There is nothing like it, I can assure you,” she said. “After a stormy life, the repose of the country is the only thing that can cure one, body and mind.”

“And do you never get tired of it?”

“Never. My only sorrow is when I have to leave to go to London.”

“How curious it is that de Tesles should still care to see you,” he said, “and yet have no desire to see his children.”

“It would be curious in an Englishman,” she answered carelessly, “but *la voix du sang* speaks very rarely in a Frenchman. They are kinder to women than our countrymen, I think. You rarely hear of a Frenchman kicking his wife to death—which is a daily occurrence in some of our counties—but their paternal feelings are very badly developed.”

“And he has never wished to see them?”

“He never says much about them; not that I ever

encourage him to do so. I would much rather that they should believe their father to be dead and think of me as their only parent."

"And do they never ask embarrassing questions?"

"Not now. They often used to do so when they were children, but I put it down so strongly then that they have long since given it up altogether."

"They are charming," he said, still under the influence of his good humour; "good looking and well brought up."

"I have taken great pains with their education," she answered, proudly.

"Harold is like you," he said, "but your daughter is more like her father."

"Yes. The likeness is very striking."

And then he asked her about Kingston, and wanted to know if he was not an acknowledged suitor of Alice's. But Mrs. Maroni hastily undeceived him, and explained the circumstances under which he was there.

"I hope you don't think there is anything serious between them," she added.

"No," he said. "It was only a stray shot, but they are very likely to fall in love with each other, having nothing else to do."

"You are right," said Mrs. Maroni uneasily. "I must tell Harold to get rid of him; he has been here quite long enough."

After this they strolled towards the house, and the remainder of the evening was spent in the drawing-room, where Alice played and sang to them. Malloret seated himself close to the piano and paid much attention to the fair young musician, whilst Kingston devoted himself to Mrs. Maroni. He was surprised to see her in such good spirits, and marvelled inwardly at the sudden change. She felt grateful to him for having had the tact to absent himself when she wanted to be alone with Malloret, so she put forth all her powers to please him, and the evening passed very pleasantly indeed. And when eleven o'clock struck, Malloret said he must go home. Early hours were indispensable in the country and he meant to try their effect. Harold then said that he would walk with him to his inn, and the party broke up.

Mrs. Maroni was a little uneasy at seeing them go off together. She had still that horrible feeling that Malloret might say something to her son on the way which would arouse his suspicions. It was dreadful to be under the spell of these ghastly fears. Life was not worth having under such circumstances, and she passed a miserable half hour until Harold returned. But the sight of his smiling, handsome face soon reassured her and she retired to her room a far happier woman than she had been the night before.

CHAPTER XIV.

HAROLD'S SUCCESS.

THE next day brought quite a little excitement in the hitherto peaceful Maroni household. Three invitations arrived at the same time—one to dine at the Perrys', and two others to afternoon entertainments. This state of things was easily to be accounted for by the unusual sight of the Maronis at any sort of party. Then, too, men were at a great premium in that neighbourhood, and any family which could produce two such young and good-looking specimens as Harold Maroni and Geoffrey Kingston, was bound to be eagerly welcomed. So the invitations were sent forth, and they certainly caused Mrs. Maroni a certain amount of annoyance. She did not wish her children to be drawn into society, and she felt that it was provoking that people should gather from their one appearance at the Perrys' that they were ready to go anywhere. Moreover, it entailed disappointment to them and caused unpleasant explanations as to her reasons for refusing. The dinner, she at once determined to decline, and as for the afternoon parties, they could be accepted in the

first instance, and then she would trust to the uncertainty of the climate to produce a providential wet day when they took place. As she herself was included in the Perrys' invitation, she had no difficulty in refusing. She never went anywhere, and that in itself was sufficient excuse. Harold and Alice were disappointed, and the former, at any rate, was woefully glum for a time, but he recovered his spirits when he received a note later on from Mrs. Perry, begging that he, at least, would come and dine with them on the day they had named. To this Mrs. Maroni could have no possible objection, so her son gladly wrote back and accepted.

Harold Maroni cherished many pleasant memories of the day he had spent at the Perrys', and he was longing to see Marian again. They had touched upon poetry in the course of their conversation, and after the manner of most young people whose affections are in the budding stage. Of course they both liked poetry. Miss Perry worshipped Tennyson and Harold raved about Byron, and then he had told her that he had just got Browning's new poem, and that he would bring it her to read if she cared for it, adding, naturally, that he would like to read it with her. Of course Miss Perry said that she should be delighted, and he therefore had this prospective treat in view as well as the dinner party. His love, which he had scarcely dared to call by that name even to himself, was entirely dif-

ferent to that experienced by Kingston for Alice. Harold had none of the selfish, mercenary thoughts that actuated his friend. He had conceived a strong liking for the girl, which only required a little encouragement to become a lifelong love. He determined to take her the book that very day, and made a rambling kind of excuse to Kingston for leaving him alone, which the latter easily saw through, and which he readily accepted. Indeed, he was delighted at the turn events had taken, as he anticipated that owing to her brother's absence he would be able to pass a considerable time alone with Alice. Her mother would probably be still much occupied in meditating over the Malloret episode, and they would necessarily be left in a great measure to their own devices.

Harold started off in good spirits, and was fortunate enough to meet the two Perry girls on his way to their house. They both liked him, and they were pleased to see his handsome, smiling face coming towards them. Julia felt that she was *de trop*, but there was no help for it, and they would have to put up with her, at any rate, for the moment. Her sister had told her how charming she considered Mr. Maroni, and had half confided in Julia that he appeared to entertain the same opinion with regard to herself. It was a pity he was so young, Marian said—only a year older than herself. Julia had replied that she thought that this was a good

thing: disparity in age as regards husband and wife generally ended badly, and for her part she was convinced that the nearer the ages of married people approached each other, the less likely was their marriage to prove a failure.

Harold was riding, and the sisters were on foot, so the conversation at first was somewhat difficult, but after a few minutes he dismounted and led his horse, and they all three walked to the house together. The Perrys were very hospitable people and immediately insisted on his remaining to luncheon, and when that meal was over, the three young people adjourned to the garden, and Julia discreetly took a wrong turning in the shrubbery, and so was conveniently lost to view. Then the book of poems was produced from young Maroni's pocket, and he proceeded to read out the passages which had struck him as being the most beautiful and original. And Marian admired them with the same enthusiasm which he exhibited, but before long they both found that their own prose was more interesting to them than Browning's poetry. And so the book was closed, and Harold commenced to tell the oft-told tale. Not indeed in the brief way in which it has here been described. He required much beating about the bush, and was guilty of many involved phrases, and, so far from being eloquent, his language was halting, and he stammered almost painfully. But, after all, what did

it matter? Marian gathered that she was loved, and the knowledge made her happy. Her lover was certainly not a fortune hunter; he was altogether too young and inexperienced to be suspected of any such intention, and he was so different from all the men she had known in London. They all seemed made of the same pattern there, their clothes all cut the same way, their hair parted in exactly the same style, and their blasé boredom precisely similar. Harold had nothing of the London *gommeux* about him. He was not faultless, to be sure. Truth to tell, he was a trifle rustic, but, anyhow, that was better than being languid and unmanly. So Miss Perry lent a kindly ear to his blundering way of expressing his feelings, and later on, when he arrived at the culminating point, and told her in so many words that he loved her, and had done so from the first time he saw her, she did not attempt to reprove him, but smiled in a manner that sent Harold at a bound to the seventh Heaven. After this came the usual inquiry on his part, if Marian thought it possible that she could ever care for him a little bit, and the young lady, throwing off her reserve, said that she liked him very much. Evidently there were still higher Heavens to be reached, thought Harold, as he heard her say these words.

Then came the other side of the picture, the question

as to what her parents would say when they learned that he loved her and had had the presumption to tell her so. The two young people both became dejected when they considered this important question.

Marian told him that her parents both loved her very dearly, and had always spoilt her, and she feared they would object to his youth, and to the fact that he had no profession, and that even if they did ultimately give their consent, they would certainly insist upon a very long engagement. Neither of them feared this last condition; they were both content to wait, safe in the assurance of each other's affections, and Harold promised that he would adopt a profession with the least delay possible, and, having done so, work hard at it.

His words were very boyish and reckless, but he was genuine and frank with her, and insisted on being allowed to make his offer in proper form to Marian's parents. Miss Perry, however, begged that he would not do so immediately. They had seen so very little of each other even though they had been near neighbours for the last ten years, and she was confident that her father would have to be led up to it gently. Anything brusque or hasty might ruin their prospects for life. Harold must wait until after he had dined with them, and then he could either write to her father or

speaking to him. Harold said he would rather adopt the latter course; he was a very bad hand at writing letters, and he thought that he could plead his cause much better in person.

Then came more playful love-making, which ended with a prolonged kiss, and then Julia innocently emerged from behind a tree.

It was not until after he had gone that Marian, when dressing for dinner, confided to her sister that she had a great secret to tell her.

"You need not trouble yourself," said Julia flippantly. "I heard him kiss you."

"Heard him?" ejaculated Marian. "Why, where were you?"

"I might have been a mile off, and I daresay I should have heard it all the same," said her sister. "As it happened, I was a few paces off, looking at you; but the smack resounded right through the wood."

Then Marian had to tell her that he had proposed, and that she felt she loved him very much; but not a word was to be said for the next few days, until she had thoroughly sounded her mother.

"I wish you every joy," said Julia. "He is certainly very good-looking, and I should think had no nonsense in him."

"He is an angel," said Marian, with the ready gush of her age.

"Angel or not," said her sister, "he is a charming young fellow, and a delightful contrast to most of the men we have met in London. I only hope that I may be equally fortunate."

Then the sisters kissed each other and went down to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XV.

CAPTAIN MALLORET MAKES A FRESH PROPOSITION.

WHEN Harold returned home he found his mother alone in her boudoir. She told him that Captain Malloret had just called, and that he was walking about the garden with Kingston and Alice. Harold longed to tell her his news. There had always been such close sympathy between them that he felt sure she would share in his joy, and be warm in her congratulations; but he remembered Marian's injunctions, and so refrained. His mother asked him if he had had a pleasant day, and then he burst into a rapturous description of the kindness of the Perrys, and their manifold charms and virtues, and then, fearing that he might commit himself if he enlarged much more on this topic, he said he would go into the garden and look for the rest of the party.

"Send Captain Malloret to me," said his mother nonchalantly. "He is going away to-morrow, and I have some commissions for him to do in London."

"All right," said Harold and he went up and kissed her on the brow before leaving the room.

Mrs. Maroni had not yet had an opportunity of

giving Malloret the two hundred pounds, and she was anxious that he should have them, and that she should see the last of him.

In a few minutes her visitor entered and said conventionally:

"You have some commissions for me to do?"

"Yes; there is the money to pay for them," said Mrs. Maroni sarcastically—"two hundred pounds." And then, in another voice, "Make haste and take it before any one comes in."

"Thanks," he said, coolly pocketing the money; "you have rendered me an immense service."

"I am glad to hear it, for I am afraid, as I told you yesterday, it would be the last one I should be able to render you."

"You don't speak as kindly as you did yesterday," said Malloret, with rather a hard manner.

"Perhaps I don't feel the same. Women vary, you know. However, I hope you will give me no further occasion for reproaches. I trust I shall never see you after to-day."

"You are getting more impolite every minute," he said, with a disagreeable smile, "and I have no doubt that you will be surprised to hear that I have just been struck by an idea, which, however, I fear is not at all in accordance with your wish. Would you like to hear it?"

"I suppose it is something fiendish."

"Fiendish?"

"I don't expect much else from you."

"It is not fiendish. On the contrary, it would be an act of self-sacrifice on my part, and be the means of assuring your security—from me, at any rate—for the rest of your life."

"Well, let me hear it," she said, interested in spite of herself.

Then he paused a few seconds, and, looking her straight in the face, said:

"Why should I not marry your daughter?"

Mrs. Maroni started. The proposition was so unexpected, so monstrous, that for the moment she felt speechless and unable to collect her thoughts. And then she controlled herself, and said in a calm voice:

"Your idea is a very humorous one. Of course you intend it for a joke?"

"Not at all. It seems to me a way out of our difficulties, and one which would insure happiness to us all."

"Do you think it would ensure Alice's happiness?" asked Mrs. Maroni.

"I see no reason why it should not. I daresay I should make her as good a husband as any other man. Her fortune would extricate me from my miserable position, and rich people are always good and virtuous. It would save you any explanation as to her family,

and you will be perfectly secure against exposure. You may be sure I should never blow upon my own mother-in-law."

"I was not wrong, after all, when I said that your idea was a fiendish one," she said, rising and pointing to the door. "I decline to entertain it for a moment. Leave the house, and never let me see you again."

But Malloret was not to be so easily dismissed. He remained immovable, and said in cold, cutting tones: "You are very heroic, not to say melodramatic. You seem to forget that it is not every one who would care to marry your daughter."

"I would rather see her in her grave, than your wife," retorted Mrs. Maroni.

"I fail to see the objection," he said, still keeping up his cold tone. "It may be an excess of conceit on my part, but I am really not bad-looking; I come of a good family, and the money I lack she possesses. To my mind, it would be a most desirable match."

"And do you think she would ever consent?" said Mrs. Maroni scornfully.

"If she were properly talked to she might do so. I suppose you possess a certain amount of influence over her, and that she would listen to your advice."

"Do you seriously think that I can advise her to accept you," she said with a contemptuous smile.

"I think it would be to your advantage to do so," he answered.

"Why?"

"For the same reason that induced you to give me the money I now have in my pocket."

"Do you mean to say that you are going to continue to threaten me?" she said, a sudden wild despair seizing her. "Is my peace of mind only to be won at the cost of sacrificing my daughter?"

"It would be no sacrifice," he said doggedly. "It would be a good thing for you both."

"I see you now in your true colours, Captain Maloret. I was indeed a fool when I listened to your promises, and believed that there yet remained one spark of honour or gentlemanlike feeling in you. As you say, it would be a good thing for both of us. A pleasant riddance for me to know that I had silenced the blackmailer, and a joyful prospect to my daughter to marry him. Are you aware that people who extort money by threats are more severely dealt with by the law than any other class of criminals, save, perhaps, a murderer? A common thief or burglar is looked upon with greater leniency. He, at any rate, risks something in committing his crime, but the scoundrel who lives upon the secret of some miserable victim who is in his power, richly deserves the terrible punishment he gets when he is discovered and convicted. And it

is this worse than thief, this cowardly blackguard and human vulture, who is proposed to me as a good husband for my daughter. No—a thousand times, no! You may tell them the worst you know of me. Even that would be a better fate for us all than to unite ourselves with a man of your stamp.”

She had worked herself into a fury as she poured forth these words. “Have them in now,” she continued wildly, “and let them hear their mother’s shameful story. Tell them all you know, and then I will ask my son to give you the soundest thrashing that ever man had in this world.”

“You are exciting yourself very unnecessarily” he said, with that provokingly calm demeanour that he had maintained throughout the entire interview. “My idea does not please you. *Tant pis*. I must think of another, that’s all.”

“Then pray do not let it be one that concerns me,” she said. “From this day forth I decline ever to speak to you, and if ever you dare present yourself at my house the servants shall have instructions to kick you from the door.”

“The servants of *la belle Hélène*,” he said with a cruel laugh; “you are really too amusing.”

“If I am amusing you are cruel and merciless,” she said, overcome by her great passion and feeling weak

and prostrate. "Have you no pity for me, no thought of what I must be suffering?"

"You find a very powerful and abusive flow of language for your sufferings," he said with a smile. "I had no idea what I should call forth when I suggested this plan. Seriously speaking, you will not find it so easy to obtain a husband for your daughter, whereas I can always find a wife. I might have married over and over again; there are always women with money made in trade ready to marry a man who is heir to a title; but I shudder at them all. Your daughter has been brought up as a lady and is in every respect most charming. I really think you might consider it."

"It is out of the question," she said, now in a calmer frame of mind. "Alice could never love you, and I would never give my consent."

"You may alter your mind; and as to the girl, I would do all the loving."

Mrs. Maroni trembled as she heard him speak so coolly and assuredly on the subject. Now that she was calmer she realized even more than ever the full horror of the situation. In her passionate rage she had declared herself to be reckless about anything he might say. But now that her reason had returned she felt that it would kill her if ever her children learned her past. Then, too, she was certain that Harold would never hold up his head again. Alice, she did not so

much think of. Her daughter was too childish and ignorant to fully realize what Malloret might divulge. But Harold! Harold who loved her so dearly, who had always been such a good son. It was too terrible, too maddening; her death could be the only way to secure peace for them all. And yet she did not want to die. She loved her children too well to wish to leave them. She sat down again and buried her face in her hands, having lost all self-control. Malloret saw her weakness and took advantage of it in order to pursue his idea.

"Are you coming round a little?" he said. "Will you give me permission to pay my court to the young lady?"

"I cannot," she moaned. "It would be too awful—too awful! Have some mercy upon me."

"I will give you till to-morrow to think of it," he said. "I daresay a night's reflection will do you good."

And then he got up and walked towards the door.

"I suppose I may go and wish them good-bye?" he said. "And what time shall I call to-morrow?"

"For God's sake, let me see you no more!" she cried in an impassioned voice, and at that moment Kingston and Alice entered the room.

There could be no mistake this time as to the fact that a scene had taken place. Everything in Mrs. Maroni's appearance denoted a fierce mental struggle,

and the evidence of tears were strongly marked on her face.

"What's the matter, mother?" said Alice, rushing forward to her and kissing her affectionately.

Now this was too much for Mrs. Maroni, whose nerves finally gave way under the tenderness of her daughter. She felt the room turning round and then everything becoming dim, and in a moment more she lost consciousness, and Kingston had only just time to make a sudden start forward as Mrs. Maroni swayed for an instant, and then fell in a dead swoon into his arms.

CHAPTER XVI.

MALLORET DETERMINES TO PURSUE HIS ADVANTAGE.

It was some time before Mrs. Maroni recovered consciousness, and when at last she did so she was assailed by numberless inquiries as to the cause of her sudden illness. Curiously enough, it had occurred to none to question Malloret. While the poor lady remained in her swoon those about her were too much occupied in hunting for numerous remedies, and as soon as she showed any signs of improvement Malloret discreetly left the house.

Mrs. Maroni briefly told them that Captain Malloret and she had been talking about old times, and that the various incidents connected with her father which her visitor had brought to her recollection had upset her, and then she had cried, and then Alice's sudden appearance had startled her, and she was unable to remember anything else. It was all over now, and they must think no more about it. Alice and Harold of course obeyed her, and implicitly believed her story; but Kingston, who had heard her heart-broken appeal—"For God's sake, go, and never let me see you

again," was not so credulous. He thought it very likely that this man might prove to be her husband, and that he had some shady story attached to his name which rendered it undesirable that he should declare himself to his children. Perhaps he had escaped from prison—his hair was certainly remarkably short; perhaps he was an outlaw, and his presence in this country might be attended with considerable danger to himself; perhaps—in short, speculation was endless as to what he might be. But in the many surmises that entered Kingston's brain there was one that never for a moment found a place there, and that was that Malloret had been proposing for the girl he himself loved.

Captain Malloret called in the course of the day, and made anxious inquiries after Mrs. Maroni's state of health, but that lady had given strict orders that on no account was he to be admitted. She was too ill to see any one, she declared, and she wished her children to remain with her. Malloret received the message with considerable ill-humour, which, indeed, he made no pretence to disguise, but he had not hardihood enough to attempt to force his way into Mrs. Maroni's presence, so he determined that he would for the present quit the rural gold-mine he had discovered, and return to town laden with a specimen of its ore.

Anyhow he had money enough for his present necessities; and, under all the circumstances, his matri-

monial projects might very well wait. It was certainly a splendid idea this marriage with Alice Maroni, but it would be quite as well to let things calm down a little, and not be too precipitate in applying the thumbscrew to her mother. Mrs. Maroni must have time in which to reflect upon the disadvantages of an exposure, and when she had done so he would renew his demand, and this time he would admit of no refusal.

So he took the evening express to London, and, much to the amazement of Mrs. Potter and her enchanting progeny, he arrived at their house next morning in time for breakfast.

Mrs. Potter's joy knew no bounds. She received her lodger, metaphorically and literally, with open arms. When the cab stopped and she caught sight of the portmanteau, whose departure had caused Theresa such sinister suspicions, she called out loudly to her children to come and witness the welcome sight.

"Tess! Gus!" she screamed, "come here. The captain's back, luggage and all; go and open the door to him," and the next moment she had changed her cap and was standing in the passage fumbling for her purse in order to pay the cab.

"Oh! captain, this is a pleasant surprise!" she said, "do you want change for the cabman? Gus, don't attempt to lift that box; you will strain yourself, dear. Where's Mariar? Mariar!" and so calling for the long-

suffering cook she proceeded to bustle about in a wild state of excitement, during which, however, she managed to whisper to her promising son, "Gus, go and fetch a pound of sausages round the corner; he likes a sausage with his breakfast."

Mallorete magnanimously refused to allow Mrs. Potter to pay the cabman, and producing a handful of glittering coins from his pocket he told the cook to pay the man with half a sovereign and added that she might keep the change for herself. This was almost too much for Mrs. Potter, who with difficulty restrained herself from shedding tears at the sight of her boarder's sudden wealth. Then they all adjourned to the dining-room where the sight of the dirty tablecloth and pewter tea-service and the cheap crockery caused Mallorete an involuntary shudder. How well he knew them, and how heartily he hated them!

"You never wrote!" said Mrs. Potter, with a mingled look of reproach and affection.

"I had no time," he answered; "I was too busy collecting my rents."

"Well, never mind," said the good-natured widow, "I hope you succeeded in getting them. You will find everything ready for you. Your room has had a thorough turn-out; I lent Mariar a hand myself and I daresay you will soon find that 'there's no place like home!'"

"I scarcely feel I have any home now," he answered somewhat ungraciously; "I have been so long a wanderer on the face of the earth."

The twins had scarcely taken their eyes off him since he entered the house, but they never uttered a word. Theresa considered his return as extraordinary as his sudden departure, and she was not prepared to show him any amiability until she heard that her mother's plethoric bill was going to be paid. Augustus rarely took the initiative, and, as a rule, followed his sister's lead, so he was waiting for her to say something before he committed himself. Malloret became uneasy under the steady glare of their four ghoulis eyes and he said rather impatiently:

"What are you staring at, children. Are you overcome with joy at my return?"

"I am not," said Theresa frankly, "I don't know whether Gus is."

And then Mrs. Potter reminded her son of the order she had given him to go and buy some sausages, and Augustus with a frankness equal to his sister's, said:

"I was waiting for the shilling; you know the man won't trust us!"

"I know nothing of the sort," said Mrs. Potter sharply, and overcome with confusion she led him out

of the room, and an angry altercation was heard on the other side of the door.

"Enjoyed yourself?" asked Miss Potter, as soon as she was left alone with her enemy.

"Pretty well," he answered in the same laconic tone. "I met some very nice people."

"Any young ladies?" inquired Theresa.

"One," he answered briefly.

"Did you mash her?" asked the twin, in language she had picked up from witnessing burlesques.

"I think it was the other way about," he said smiling, "she mashed me."

"Mother will be pleased," said Theresa, quoting a comic song, and then "Mother" came into the room and put an end to the conversation.

"I have sent some hot water up to your room," she said pleasantly, in ignorance that the wrangle with Augustus had been heard by the captain. "Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes, but I daresay you would like a wash first."

Mallorete answered nothing, but left the room. Her expressions made him positively creep. "A wash," he said indignantly to himself, "why couldn't she have said a bath?"

As soon as he had gone, Mrs. Potter turned triumphantly to her daughter.

"Now, Miss Tessie, who was right? Didn't I say he'd come back?"

"You don't know all," said Theresa mysteriously.

"What all?" said Mrs. Potter, heedless of grammar.

"Never mind," answered Theresa, "I don't think we shall keep him much longer."

"Good heavens! What do you mean?" asked her mother.

"I gathered it from something he let drop."

"Theresa, I entreat you if you know anything to tell me," said Mrs. Potter in great agitation. "As your mother, I have a right to insist that you should do so."

But just then Augustus returned with the sausages oozing out of a manuscript paper which looked very much like a rejected poem that had doubtless caused its unfortunate author many a heavy sigh of disappointment.

"Here they are," he said, "and twopence change. May I keep it?"

"Certainly not," answered his mother, "you had twopence last week."

In due time Malloret returned and graced the festive board with his presence. He certainly did not look as if he thought there was no place like home. His spirits had been gradually falling ever since he had entered the house, and they were now perilously

approaching zero. No, he could not stay another month or even a week in this tenth-rate boarding-house. He must pay Mrs. Potter something on account and leave Clan William Terrace for ever. The sausages were not sufficiently cooked and displayed a sickening view of their ingredients when they were cut open, so they were again confided to "Mariar," who came into the room wiping her mouth on her apron. There was something wrong with the spout of the tea-pot, which caused the tea to come forth in reluctant dribbles or violent gusts according to the angle at which the handle was held; the butter was rancid and the bread stale. The whole repast revolted Malloret and made him more than ever determined to leave at once.

As soon as Mrs. Potter had said the grace of thanksgiving, to which he obstinately refused to echo amen, he begged for a few minutes' private conversation with her, and the twins were therefore despatched to their lessons.

Malloret began by telling his landlady that he had not been quite so successful as he had anticipated, but that he was, nevertheless, in a position to pay her a considerable sum. Would she accept fifty pounds and consent to wait a little longer for the rest?

It is scarcely necessary to say that Mrs. Potter joyfully accepted this offer and that she begged her boarder to choose his own time for paying the balance.

Mallorete then took a bundle of notes from his pocket and proceeded to count out five of ten pounds each, and handing them to her he said:

"With many thanks for your patience and kindness."

Mrs. Potter was almost ready to dissolve into tears, the money was so unexpected and welcome that she did not know what to say. With trembling hands she wrote out a receipt, which Mallorete declared was quite unnecessary, and then he proceeded to deal her what she called her death-warrant.

"Some strange things have happened since I have been away," he said, "and I may as well tell you, now that we are alone, that I am thinking of leaving you for good."

The widow grasped the back of a chair to prevent herself from falling, and sent up a silent prayer to be given strength to bear her trial.

"My circumstances have materially altered," he continued, "and I find I shall not be able to remain here."

"It is very sudden," she managed to gasp, and still clung to the chair.

"Yes, it is rather," he assented. "The fact is, Mrs. Potter, I am going to be married."

Then she released her hold on the chair, and feeling that her prayer had not been answered, she let herself go, and fell on the floor in a faint.

Mallorete was more furious than words can say. "It seems to be my fate to be always making women faint," he said to himself, and called out to the twins to come and assist their mother.

They rushed into the room, and were soon in floods of tears.

"You've killed ma!" wailed Augustus.

"Murderer!" screamed Theresa.

Fortunately, however, Mrs. Potter was one of those ladies who go in and out of swoons with great facility, and her children's grief and a burnt feather applied by "Mariar" soon brought her to.

"I am better," she murmured, opening one eye.

"What did he do?" inquired Theresa glaring at Mallorete.

"He has only broken my heart," said Mrs. Potter, and then she closed the open eye and was again lost to consciousness.

"I merely told your mother that I was leaving her," said Mallorete, and Mrs. Potter whose state of coma was not sufficiently complete to prevent her hearing his words, gave a loud scream and varied her performance by going into hysterics.

"Have you paid her?" said Theresa, practical as ever; and then her mother opened one of her clenched hands and displayed the notes that Mallorete had just given her.

"I think she will be all right now," said Malloret, ignoring Theresa, and so saying he left Mrs. Potter to the tender mercies of her children.

He had made up his mind that he would not spend another night under the roof, and he went to his room in order to begin his preparations for departure. While he was thus engaged he determined to write to Mrs. Maroni and renew his offer for her daughter's hand. It would be better to act at once, he decided. With Kingston hanging about, the girl might become engaged and even married while he was deliberating and expecting something to turn up.

So he sat down and wrote as follows:

"MY DEAR HELEN,

"I daresay you will be a little surprised to hear from me after that last civil speech of yours in which you expressed a wish never to see me again. But the fact is that I have quite made up my mind to give up the joys of bachelorhood and to seek the calm and respectability of marriage. The sight of my surroundings here has so disgusted me with my existence that I feel I cannot possibly endure it any longer.

"It is useless for me to go over the ground we so recently travelled together. It is better that I should come to the point at once, and I do so by suggesting

that there be no unreasonable delay in my becoming the husband of your daughter.

"I have before enumerated my many virtues, although this indeed was quite unnecessary, for I know you're well acquainted with them. It therefore only remains for me to say that if you again pain me by refusing your consent to my marriage with Alice, I shall be under the painful necessity of asking her hand of her brother, to whom I shall naturally give the same reason for demanding it as I gave you."

"Believe me,

"Yours very sincerely,

"STEPHEN MALLORET."

Having finished this precious letter he felt highly pleased with himself, and went out for a stroll and posted it. Upon further reflection he determined not to leave Bayswater that day; he would await Mrs. Maroni's answer, and, as in any case, he had made up his mind to return to Cornwall, it was not worth while to change his abode during the few days he would remain in town.

A week passed, and there was no answer. And then he wrote again, and this time a letter of a still more threatening character, and on that being apparently treated in the same fashion as its predecessor, he despatched another, even more brutal and

cowardly than before. Still Mrs. Maroni made no sign. Malloret had determined to start for Cornwall, when the long-expected reply from Helen Maroni arrived. He opened it feverishly, and was positively amazed at its contents.

"MY DEAR CAPTAIN MALLORET," wrote Mrs. Maroni.

"I am coming up to London on a matter of great urgency in a few days, and I will then answer your letter *vivâ voce*. Strange events have happened since we last met, and I think you will be interested in hearing what I have to tell you.

"Believe me,

"Yours sincerely,

"HELEN MARONI."

Malloret was much puzzled at this letter, and read it over two or three times without arriving at any satisfactory conclusion. Why had she not clearly told him what the strange events were that had happened? However, there was nothing to be done. He must patiently wait for her next move and resign himself to a few more days' sojourn in Clan William Terrace.

It was a great disappointment to him. He would have liked a direct reply one way or the other, and then he would have better known how to act. As it

was, he was quite in the dark as to the course of conduct Mrs. Maroni intended to pursue, and he chafed considerably at having to prolong his stay at Mrs. Potter's. While thinking it all over, it suddenly occurred to him that Mrs. Maroni might be playing him false. Perhaps she was hastening on a marriage between Alice and Kingston in view of frustrating his plans, or perhaps she was making arrangements for flight, and wanted to gain a little time in which to complete her preparations. He determined to have no nonsense of that sort, and so he sent off a telegram to Mrs. Maroni, stating that if he did not receive a satisfactory answer to his proposition on the next day he should at once leave for Cornwall. In the course of three or four hours came a telegram from her saying:

"I shall be in London to-morrow, and will call upon you."

This was decidedly good news. Clearly she was at last coming to her senses, and it would not be very difficult to prove to her that he was thoroughly in earnest in his intention to marry Alice, and that his threats had not been idle ones.

CHAPTER XVII.

MRS. MARONI MAKES A CONFESSION.

WHEN Mrs. Maroni received Malloret's first letter she was seized with precisely the same feelings of amazement and fear that had possessed her when the scoundrel had attempted to extort money from her. She had hoped that, as she had given him the sum he had asked for, he would have left her in peace, at any rate, for a while, and that she would have been able to think over what was best to be done before she heard from him again. It seemed to her that it would be little short of an infamy to consent to a union such as he proposed—a union without the slightest affection on either side. It was not likely that Alice would regard the matter from a favourable point of view, and she herself would certainly not sacrifice her daughter to avoid her own exposure. Better, as she had told Malloret, that her children should know all rather than that Alice's happiness should be sacrificed to this rascal's selfishness and insatiable greed of money. In due time she received a letter from M. de Tesles, in

answer to one she had written to him, but it afforded her no comfort.

"You are as clever in dealing with these sort of people as I should be," he wrote, "and I really do not see what advice I can give you. Try and make him repeat his threats in writing, and then hand him over to the police or consult your lawyer. This is all I can think of, but I am afraid that it will not extricate you from your difficulty. As I do not know my children I cannot say in what light they would regard an exposure, but, frankly speaking, I think the days for heroics are over, and that you are troubling yourself unnecessarily. Your son has arrived at an age when, doubtless, he must have formed some opinion of your past life beyond what you have actually told him, and if Captain Malloret attempts to enlighten him further, I should think that all the gentleman would receive for his pains would be a sound thrashing."

This letter was certainly not encouraging. She naturally understood her son better than did de Tesles, and she knew his high opinion of her, and his own high-principled nature. It was all very well for the *blasé* Parisian to say that the days for heroics were over, but, at all events, they were not so as far as her children were concerned. Harold and Alice would never recover from such a blow if once they were to learn that they were both illegitimate, and that their

mother had lived a lying life, not only before she came to Cornwall, but indeed ever since. Then, too, if they were to learn the real cause of her periodical visits to London the knowledge would break their hearts. It would certainly break her own if their affection were to change and to turn into cold contempt and reproach.

De Tesles' advice was perfectly useless. If she were to adopt his suggestion and hand over the black-mailer to the police there would, of course, be a dreadful scandal; and that was exactly what she wished to avoid. On the other hand, if she consulted her lawyer she would be bound to be guided by his advice, and there was no saying where or how the affair might end. It was quite clear that if Malloret were to show his teeth the matter could not be determined without a great deal of publicity, which could not fail to have the most ruinous effects upon herself and her children. She looked upon Malloret in the scheme of creation as very little better than a sewer-rat, and she felt that if the animal were tackled by a legal terrier and driven into a corner he would be certain to show his teeth.

The poor lady was perfectly distracted and kept her room for two whole days, during which she could only pray for some inspiration that would deliver her from her troubles. Harold and Alice were most attentive to her, and begged to be allowed to remain in her

room all day, but truth to tell, she could scarcely bear their presence. She was nervous and unstrung, and she felt that she would be much better if left alone. She told them that she was suffering from nervous headache, and that the best cure for it was perfect rest and quiet. So the young people were left pretty much to their own devices, and Alice and Kingston spent many pleasant hours together, while Harold was almost always occupied in thinking of Marian Perry. A week passed and then Mrs. Maroni received Malloret's second letter. Still she did nothing, and it was only when a final letter arrived, breathing threats of a still more alarming character, that Mrs. Maroni came to the conclusion that she must act at once. She had formed a hope that Kingston might do something for her. It was possible, and even probable, that he loved Alice, and by speaking to him she might perhaps induce him to suggest something that would obviate the sacrifice of her daughter. Directly after breakfast she asked him to come and take a turn in the garden with her, and she determined to seek his aid and see what he would propose. It would, of course, be a painful ordeal to have to tell him that her children were illegitimate, but, after all, anything was better than suffering in silence as she had done for the last few days. Her confidence might very probably have the effect of throwing a douche on his affection for Alice, and he

might not care to marry a nameless child. But as to all that she was absolutely indifferent. In the first place, Mr. Kingston was not the husband she would have chosen for her daughter, and, secondly, his advice would doubtless be valuable.

As soon as they were alone she began by saying that she had a purpose in asking him to come for this walk.

"I am in a terrible difficulty," said Mrs. Maroni, "and I think that you may be able to help me."

"I shall be only too delighted," he said. His curiosity was at last going to be gratified, and the thought made him pleased; and then, as she still remained silent, he encouraged her to speak by saying:

"I fear that your difficulty relates to Captain Malloret; does it not?"

"It does," she answered. "How did you discover it?"

"Your manner has changed since he came here," he said. "For some time past I have feared that there was something wrong."

"He wishes to marry my daughter," she said, and Kingston started as he heard the words. None of his suspicions had pointed in this direction. He had thought it very likely that Malloret might be Alice's father, but the idea that he wished to marry her had never entered his head for a moment.

"You surprise me," he said. "I never saw Captain Malloret pay her the least attention, and, in fact, he scarcely knows her."

"It surprised me more than you," said Mrs. Maroni.

"And you refused him?"

"I refused him, as you may suppose; but he declines to accept my refusal, and has renewed his demand. You see I am in a terrible plight."

"Is he so very undesirable?"

"He is altogether undesirable, and yet, strange as it may appear to you, I am not in a position to refuse him anything he asks me."

Then Kingston knew that the explanation was forthcoming and he pricked up his ears.

"I gather that he has obtained some influence over you," he said, "and I fear that he has come here to make use of it."

"He knows my past history," she said sadly; "a history that is full of shame and sorrow, and he threatens me with exposure unless I accede to his proposal."

"The scoundrel!" ejaculated Kingston.

"I must tell you all," said Mrs. Maroni. And then she paused. It was so difficult to begin her story and to lay bare her past life to this new acquaintance.

"You may place every confidence in me," he said encouragingly.

"I trust you as a man of honour," she answered, "and you must promise me never to betray my confidence."

"I pledge you my solemn word," and then as she still remained silent and appeared unable to begin, he said.

"You have been divorced?"

"I have never been married," replied Mrs. Maroni; and at this startling announcement Kingston pursed up his lips and gave vent to a low and prolonged whistle. This was the last piece of intelligence he had expected to hear, and for the minute he could scarcely recover himself or think of anything to say.

"Your children are not aware of what you have told me?" he asked, after a few moments' silence.

"They are in total ignorance of it," she answered, "and it is the fear that Malloret may tell them that is driving me distracted. I will not enter into all my life. Such a narrative would only tire you and pain me. I was betrayed when quite a young girl, and, guided by youth and inexperience, I accepted the situation instead of putting an end to my life as I suppose I ought to have done. But one day I suddenly broke off my past existence and I determined to leave the father of my children and to devote myself to them alone. I have done so for the last twelve years, leading a life of seclusion, caring only for their education

and welfare, and happy in the knowledge that I was securing the undying love of them both. My life has been dull, monotonous, and what would even appear impossible to most women, but I accepted it readily and willingly, anxious only that I should retain my children's love and respect, and thankful that I could in some measure expiate my early fault. And now, when I am beginning to earn my reward in the sight of their affection, and indeed devotion, I find my whole work shattered and myself threatened with utter disgrace and exposure. Is it not horrible?"

"I pity you sincerely," said he. "I suppose the rascal wants to secure Alice's money?"

"Naturally. He is a dissolute spendthrift, and has run through every shilling he has ever had, and anticipated everything that was coming to him. He is the kind of man who will stop at nothing now that he is penniless."

"Does he know that your daughter will have a fortune?"

"Of course he does; and he told me that it was not every man who would care to marry my daughter."

Kingston hesitated. It was perfectly true that many men were not anxious to marry the daughters of ladies who admitted having had early faults, but he had no

such scruples himself, and in his own lazy way he loved Alice. He had no fortune to offer her in return, and he disliked the idea of marrying a girl for her money. But he determined, nevertheless, to tell Mrs. Maroni a considerable portion of what had happened between them and to hear what she had to say on the subject.

"I am scarcely in a position to advise you," he said, "and after you have heard what I have to tell you, you will be better able to understand my embarrassment. You may, perhaps, have noticed that I have paid your daughter a great deal of attention and you will possibly not be surprised that we have learned to love each other and that she has promised to be my wife."

Mrs. Maroni was not greatly surprised. The first part of his declaration she had already guessed, although she was scarcely prepared to hear that Kingston had proposed to Alice and had been accepted by her.

"And do you mean to say that what I have told you will make no difference in your feelings?"

"It will not make the slightest difference," he said. "I love Alice for herself, and neither the knowledge of your past nor the fear of your ultimate exposure would make me change my mind."

Then Mrs. Maroni was relieved. It was comforting to know that there was a man ready to marry her daughter who knew the worst that could be said about her. Still the knowledge of this did not remove her anxiety about Malloret, indeed she felt it would only complicate matters. If Captain Malloret were to hear that Alice and Kingston loved each other it would make him more desperate than ever.

"I am thankful to you for your kind words," she said, "very thankful, indeed, for Alice's sake that it will make no difference in your affection. But what am I to do about Captain Malloret? You know that it would kill Harold if ever he were to learn the truth."

"Harold loves you devotedly," said Kingston. "He is never tired of singing your praises, and I believe that his love is so great that he would never listen to a word against you—and that whatever Malloret said would make no difference in his affection."

"All you say is true," she answered. "But it only makes me dread the more what he would feel if he were to know his mother's history."

"I suppose it would be impossible to buy this villain off with a lump sum?" suggested Kingston.

"It would not be of the slightest use," she answered. "As I have told you, he is a gambler and a spendthrift."

No amount of money that I might give him would insure my peace in the future."

"Then I really do not see in what way I can help you. I can only ask you formally for the hand of your daughter and I should imagine then that Malloret would see that his case is hopeless."

"And then, of course, he would speak and disgrace me out of revenge," she said wearily.

"When once I am your daughter's husband and have the right to protect you both, I do not think that you will have much more to fear. Captain Malloret is one of those vagabonds who are very fierce when they have only a defenceless woman to deal with, but they exhibit very little courage indeed when brought face to face with a man. Be guided by me, my dear lady. Put aside your fears and act boldly. Let me be received as your daughter's affianced husband—defy this blackmailer and leave me to deal with him."

"It shall be as you say," said Mrs. Maroni. "I feel easier in my mind than I have felt for many a long day. I cannot say that all anxiety has passed away, but I have perfect confidence in you, and I know that you will act for the best. You will not find me ungrateful, Mr. Kingston. Pray believe that I now see how wise I was to trust you."

"You will never regret the confidence you have reposed in me, Mrs. Maroni," said Kingston.

"I am sure of that," she answered, and they returned to the house.

"Shall I tell her everything?" Kingston asked himself. "No; after all," he thought, "it will be better to wait."

CHAPTER XVIII.

KINGSTON'S FATE.

ALICE was soon made acquainted with the fact that Kingston had asked her mother's consent to their marriage and that Mrs. Maroni had agreed to accept him as a son-in-law. The next days were very pleasant ones for the young people, who seemed to grow more and more attached to each other and little guessed the terrible *dénoûment* to their love-making that was looming in the immediate future.

A few days after the lawn-tennis party came an invitation to dinner at the Perrys', and this was accepted by Mrs. Maroni for the three young people although not for herself. Nothing would induce her to go into society under false pretences and render herself liable to a reproach that she felt would be well deserved if the secret of her life should ever be discovered. So when the night of the dinner-party arrived, her son, and her daughter, and her daughter's fiancé started off in high spirits, leaving her at home to ponder upon the hardships that fate inflicts upon those that wander, no matter under what extenuating circumstances, from a certain narrow

path that all mothers who value their peace of mind must walk in, or, at all events, appear to walk in, and give the world no opportunity of asserting the contrary.

The young people on reaching The Towers found that the dinner-party was a large one. In addition to several of the neighbouring magnates and their wives and daughters, there was a large house party whose chief ornament was Mr. Justice Twistem, who rejoiced in the reputation of being a hanging judge, but was in reality extremely kind-hearted and one of the "mildest-mannered men who ever cut a throat"—we mean sentenced a criminal to be hanged by the neck until he was dead. Harold was fortunate enough to be told off to Marian Perry, but Kingston was, of course, separated from Alice Maroni, and, to his horror, was compelled to take down to dinner a certain Miss Sophonisba Tomkyns, a lady who was the terror of every member of the male persuasion with whom she came in contact, and was supposed to belong to an advanced school of thought. Miss Tomkyns's mother had been at school with Mrs. Perry, and thus it was she was staying at The Towers.

The dinner was the ordinary kind of dinner to be met with at the Perrys', and calls for no special comment. Suffice it to say that it was remarkably well cooked, for Mr. Perry possessed a *cordón bleu* and the wines were beyond reproach. It served, however, as

the subject of an amusing little after-dinner discussion when the men of the party had joined the ladies.

The discussion in question was commenced by Mrs. Perry, who remarked that their next neighbour, Lord Harkaway, had been unable to be present as he had been compelled to run up to town to vote upon the question of vivisection or no vivisection, and Mrs. Perry expressed herself in no measured terms in dealing with this subject, declaring that she regarded vivisection as one of the most barbarous and unnecessary practices that had lately grown up in our midst.

The bishop of the diocese, Doctor Celester, who had come over from St. Columb Palace to dine, entirely concurred with Mrs. Perry. "This is a question," said the right reverend prelate, "in which humanity is most deeply interested, and I am very glad to hear that Lord Harkaway has taken the trouble to go up to London to record his vote. He is a young man who will make his mark in life. His little volume, 'Big Bags of Big Game in the Black Continent,' shows him to be a master of vivid English and a man of intrepid courage."

"Oh, it was too charming!" chimed in Miss Tomkyns. "I remember a delightful chapter in which he shot fourteen lions in one morning and was nearly tossed by a rhinoceros. It was quite too delicious! I

am sure that if Lord Harkaway had a vote he gave it against those horrid vivisectionists! Only think of the cruelty of the thing! It makes me shudder! Do tell me, Sir Joseph Twistem, can we not have them flogged like garroters are?"

"It would be very desirable," said the bishop.

"And what do you think, Mr. Kingston?" said Miss Tomkyns. "We have not heard your opinion yet."

"Well," said Geoffrey, "I never form an opinion hurriedly. But I quite agree with you that to inflict pain upon animals is utterly indefensible, except for a good and great purpose."

"The end occasionally justifies the means," said the bishop.

"Exactly so," chimed in Mr. Justice Twistem. "Exactly so; but where is the end?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Perry, "where indeed? That is the point."

"These brutal creatures," said Miss Tomkyns, "cut poor animals to pieces and boil them alive, and bake them alive, and cut their eyes out, and do everything that is horrible, and then justify themselves by saying that science is the better for what they call their researches. Oh! It is quite too utterly shocking!"

"It is atrocious," said Mrs. Perry.

"I hope you will pardon me for saying so," said

young Kingston, "but I think you take a somewhat one-sided view of the matter."

"And pray, sir," said the bishop, "how do you justify this cruel and unchristian practice?"

"It is not my place to justify it, my lord; but since you ask me the question, allow me to reply by another. How does your lordship justify the most cruel and unchristian dinner of which I have this evening seen you take your full share?"

"Really, sir," said the bishop.

"Cruel and unchristian," echoed Mrs. Perry.

"Oh, Mr. Kingston!" cried Miss Tomkyns.

"Hush, hush," said Mr. Justice Twistem, lifting up his hand; "let us hear what the young gentleman has to say."

"Now it was an excellent dinner," said Kingston.

"True," answered the bishop and the judge in a duet.

"We had *tortue claire*," continued Kingston. "That turtle had its throat cut, and was hung up to bleed to death. It takes a turtle about a day to bleed to death. This tenacity of life in the turtle is a great difficulty to cooks."

"Well, but really——" said the bishop.

"Pardon me," said Kingston, "I remember that one of the dishes following was crimped salmon. The fish, while still alive, had been cut down with sharp knives

to the backbone in order that its flesh might be more tender."

"Really, sir," said the bishop, "is there any occasion for these details? They are very distressing."

"They are altogether too entirely and utterly cruel," cried Miss Tomkyns, clasping her hands and throwing back her head; "and I wonder Mr. Kingston can talk about them, especially after dinner."

"I must say I concur," said Mr. Justice Twistem. "There are certain matters which, if not *in camerâ*, are yet *in cuisinâ*." And the judge expanded his chest with the air of a man who had put an end to the discussion.

"I talk of these matters," said Kingston, "because they are facts, and usefully illustrative. Let us take some other dishes on this *menu*. I assisted you, Miss Tomkyns, to some lobster salad, which you seemed to enjoy. Now the lobsters that composed that salad had been put into cold water and then slowly boiled alive."

"Dear, dear," said the bishop.

"And more lobsters," continued Kingston, "are boiled alive in London in one day than animals are killed by vivisectionists all over Europe in the course of the year. But there is this in the form of vivisection I cannot uphold: it is when the experiment is cruel in itself, and no knowledge or good can possibly be gained from it."

"Quite so, exactly so," said the bishop and the judge, again in unison.

"As when you tear an animal to pieces——"

"Oh, horrible! Do not talk about it," said Mrs. Perry.

"In which pursuit, Mrs. Perry, many of those who have gone up to London to vote against vivisection are actively engaged during the greater part of the winter. Besides, I think Miss Tomkyns told me at dinner that you were often kind enough to take her to Hurlingham, and that she enjoyed the pigeon-shooting immensely."

"The dear Prince was there," cried Miss Tomkyns.

"Come, Mr. Kingston," said the judge, "is it fair to push our kindly hostess in this way?"

"And Providence," added the bishop, "in its infinite mercy, has given man dominion over the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air, and——"

"I was not rude enough to dream of attacking our charming hostess, my lord; I was rather addressing myself to your lordship and to Sir Joseph Twistem. I know that both of you have made speeches at public meetings accusing the medical profession—which is as honourable as any—of wanton cruelty. I do not think these aspersions are altogether fair. And I say, without fear of contradiction, that the dinner taken by you, my lord bishop, and that by you, Mr. Justice Twistem,

in its preparation involved more torture in one day than is practised in any physiological laboratory in the course of a month."

"There is common sense in these matters," said the judge. "We must give and take."

"We must be all things to all men," said the bishop.

"If you were consistent," said Mr. Kingston, "you would be a vegetarian. I have what I hope to be common sense. I eat my lobster salad and my crimped salmon, but I do not then go away and denounce it as cruel to vivisection a rabbit with the view to discover the nature of a painful and fatal disease and the best method of curing it. I heard a lady speaking a few months ago at an anti-vivisectionist meeting and observed that she wore a dolman of sealskin trimmed with sable which must have cost at least two hundred guineas. Now the animals from which those skins were taken had been skinned alive, and, by the way, I notice, Miss Tomkyns, your dress is trimmed with pretty little humming-birds the slaughter of which has been no possible benefit, and adds nothing to the charm with which nature has graced you."

"The pursuit of science for its own sake," said the bishop softly, "and without broader views of duty, renders the human heart sadly hard and proud."

"Yes," said the judge, "and also blinds us to ordinary facts and to the recognized value of evidence."

And with that profound remark the subject dropped, and nothing further worth recording took place, with the exception that Harold Maroni and Marian Perry fell more in love with each other than ever, and profited by the few opportunities that occurred in the drawing-room to tell each other as much.

The whole party returned in excellent spirits, and Mrs. Maroni obtained a reflected pleasure from witnessing their happiness apparently unalloyed.

* * * * *

Two days later a most terrible calamity befell the Maroni family. After breakfast Geoffrey Kingston had wandered by the side of the River Fowey that ran through Mrs. Maroni's grounds. He was alone, for Harold was busy with his morning occupation of tying flies and mending a lawn-tennis racket, and Alice was attending to her mother who was almost prostrate with a sick headache.

Now a hundred yards or so from where Kingston was walking there were two little urchins of some nine or ten years, fishing, and one of them, feeling a bite and leaning over in the excitement, fell into the river; and the other reaching forward in an attempt to extricate his companion from his perilous position, shared a similar fate, and when Kingston, who had witnessed

the accident, came to the rescue, both lads had sunk twice. Kingston, who was an expert swimmer, did not hesitate for a moment, but plunged into the stream.

Now there are emergencies in which swimming is absolutely useless. We need not speak of the Niagara Rapids immediately above the great falls. It is enough to imagine what would happen to a man if he fell into the little, whirling, headlong current that tumbles down the Pass of Killiecrankie. Swimmer or no swimmer, his brains would be dashed out against the rocks and boulders. Nor does all his skill avail a man much if he falls overboard heavily dressed on a dark, cold night, with a dangerous sea and a high wind, and while the vessel is going at her fastest rate of speed. And there are other accidents that may have the effect of neutralizing the skill of a Leander, or a Davenport, or a Webb. Swimming, in short, is like running; it will save us from all ordinary risks and hazards. On occasions of extraordinary peril, it is useless.

Kingston managed to grasp both the boys almost at the same time, and then attempted to reach the side of the bank. But this, to his horror, he found impossible. The fishing lines, together with some weeds, had become entangled round his legs and he was practically unable to move. He just managed to push the boys he had rescued in the direction of the bank, and the little fellows reached it in safety and clambered out of

the river more dead than alive. Then they turned to look at their preserver, who was frantically struggling in the vain attempt to get free, and the more intelligent of the two, realizing the position, rushed away for help, followed by his friend, who was too frightened and dazed to understand what was taking place.

They soon came upon a farm labourer and to him they told their tale, and all three hastened back to the scene of the accident, but when they got there Kingston was not to be seen. Half-an-hour later, with the assistance of Harold Maroni, the body was recovered and then, it is needless to say, the unhappy young man was dead. He had gone to his last account tortured with the thought of the serious injury he had inflicted upon the girl that loved him so well; but for the rest, like most young Englishmen in the presence of death, he had met his fate bravely enough.

Alice's agony at hearing of her lover's fate baffles description. For days she never quitted her room, refusing all comfort and begging that she might be left alone. She roused herself sufficiently to pay her last farewell to Geoffrey and to place a cross of flowers on his breast before the lid of the coffin was soldered down, and she was desirous of attending the funeral, but her state of health was such that Mrs. Maroni gently dissuaded her from any such attempt.

An elder brother of Mr. Kingston's—a young bar-

rister—represented his family on this painful occasion and returned to town the next day. At Alice's special request no mention was made to him of her engagement to his brother and he merely attributed her illness to the shock that the sad event of the previous week had naturally given her.

Two days after the funeral Alice, being alone with her mother, told her that she had something on her mind that she could not keep from her any longer. Mrs. Maroni was naturally anxious to hear what this could be, and then Alice confessed that three weeks before Geoffrey Kingston's death a secret marriage had taken place between them. She was not a disappointed bride-elect, but a heart-broken widow! Mrs. Maroni could scarcely believe that she heard aright; it all came upon her with such suddenness that she remained gazing at her daughter, unable to speak. Then Alice, continuing, related the circumstances under which the marriage had taken place.

Geoffrey was dependent on an uncle who wished him to marry his ward—a West Indian heiress of great wealth. He had partly consented to this union, and there was a sort of engagement between them; but when once he saw Alice, he felt that the engagement must cease, and he had written to his uncle to that effect, and told him that he had placed his affections elsewhere. He had received a very angry letter in reply, in which his uncle

insisted that he should give up Miss Maroni at once and keep to his former engagement; and the old gentleman threatened that unless this was done he would at once stop his nephew's allowance. Geoffrey was entirely dependent on the income he derived from his uncle, and would have been compelled to leave Cambridge if it was stopped, and yet he had grown to love Alice above all else. And so he gained her consent to a secret marriage, trusting that when his uncle learnt that all interference was useless he would forgive him.

Mrs. Maroni listened in silence to Alice's recital, in which there were many more details than we have given, and her surprise and anger gradually reached a climax when she heard her daughter's last word.

"Mr. Kingston behaved most dishonourably," she said. "I can find no excuse for his conduct. He abused the hospitality that I offered him, and he taught you to deceive your mother in a manner of which I should have thought you incapable."

Alice was, of course, very penitent, and could only pray for her mother's forgiveness. Her sin, such as it was, had met with a speedy punishment, and surely she had suffered enough.

"Then your marriage must be announced to the world," said Mrs. Maroni. "But have you thought of the shame of letting people know only after your husband's death that you are married?"

"I have thought of everything, till my head reels and I am ready to die," said Alice. "I have prayed even that I might die lest I should be tempted to take my own life."

"It is useless to talk like that," said her mother. "We must think what can be done for the best," and then she paused. This last blow had almost deprived her of her reasoning faculties, and she had immediately thought of Malloret and how he would be affected by it. Clearly he would now show her no mercy. He would never believe that this marriage had taken place without her connivance, and indeed would probably imagine that she had urged it on. It was no use, however, to upbraid Alice. They must reflect together over what was best to be done. And then suddenly a horrible thought struck her. Her daughter must have been married in the name of Maroni—an assumed name to which she had no right—and this fact might make her marriage illegal. She hesitated before telling Alice of the dreadful idea that had come into her mind, and then she finally decided to make a clean breast of the truth, and to tell her daughter the history of her own life, of Malloret's threats, and of the possibility that Alice might now find herself in the same position as her mother had been placed twenty years ago.

"The position must be clearly explained to you," she said. "You have confided to me the first secret of

your life, and I need not say that it is a terrible one for me to hear, but what I have to tell you is still more startling."

Then she nerved herself for the ordeal, and told Alice the whole story of her wretched life. She spared herself in no way. She told her daughter of her own miserable sufferings—the inevitable consequences of an early fault, a fault for which there is no remedy. She spoke in a hard, calculating way, quite foreign to her, and Alice listened in dumb amazement. Was it possible that her mother, whom they had all looked up to as the purest and best of women, had all along led a lying life? Her journies to London a mere pretext to meet their father—a father who did not recognize them and appeared indifferent to their very existence? Then, too, her pretended widowhood was a sham and a lie also.

It was all so surprising, so shocking, that Alice could not believe it or take it in for a moment, and then Mrs. Maroni proceeded to tell her of Malloret's threats, and the fear that he had caused her. This was also startling to Alice, and became more so when her mother told her the price at which his silence was to be obtained. The unhappy girl recoiled in horror, and vehemently declared that nothing on earth would induce her to consent to such a union. But she still had the worst to hear, and that was that her own mar-

riage with Kingston was doubtless illegal. She had told Mrs. Maroni that there was a likelihood of her becoming a mother, and the situation looked unutterably black and hopeless.

Mrs. Maroni felt a certain relief in knowing that her daughter was now acquainted with everything and that one of the awful fears that Malloret held over her head was gone; but there still remained Harold, and it was of him that she thought the most. She explained this to Alice, and together they decided that, at all events, Harold must be kept in ignorance of his mother's past.

"Will not money suffice to keep Captain Malloret silent?" inquired Alice.

"I fear not," replied her mother. "I gave him two hundred pounds only a few weeks ago, and immediately afterwards he proposed to me for you. He cannot be depended upon for one moment."

Then Alice had a supreme moment of inspiration; an idea, horribly revolting, if you like, occurred to her by which her mother and Harold might be saved and her own reputation left untarnished. Looking at her mother calmly in the face, and speaking in hard and distinct tones, she said:

"I will marry Captain Malloret, mother. By doing so his mouth will be for ever closed, and your future

peace will be assured, and, in addition, my hasty marriage with Geoffrey will for ever remain unknown."

Her mother looked at her in amazement. In place of the child she had always considered her, she now saw before her a woman, with a woman's strong resolution and purpose.

"It is impossible," said Mrs. Maroni, when she had recovered her surprise; "I would not hear of such a sacrifice."

"It would not be altogether a sacrifice," said Alice, "if my marriage is illegal." And then she repeated, "I will marry Captain Malloret, but only upon one condition. I refuse to live with him under any pretext whatever. If he will consent to these terms, you can tell him that I will marry him."

It was after this conversation that Mrs. Maroni sent her letter to Clan William Terrace informing Malloret of her arrival. There was a great deal more said between the mother and daughter, but Alice remained firm to her decision. She clearly realized the horror of the situation, but she determined that Harold should never experience the agony she herself had felt when she heard her mother's confession; and it was this, more than any thought for herself, which made her look calmly at the idea of a marriage with Malloret.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MARRIAGE ARRANGED.

MRS. MARONI rung the bell of Clan William Terrace with a feeling of dread at the interview that was before her. She had reached London the very day after her discussion with Alice, and was the bearer of her daughter's consent to marrying Malloret.

Maria showed her into the drawing-room in which Malloret had spent so many excruciating hours, and as she glanced round at the faded furniture and the old worn-out piano and harmonium, she thought to herself that it was no wonder that he should be anxious to leave such surroundings. While she was thus engaged, Mrs. Potter sailed majestically into the room followed closely by Theresa and Augustus, looking like an old hen who was very proud of her first brood of chickens.

"You wish to see the captain," she said doubtfully, wondering in her mind if this handsome, well-dressed lady was a powerful rival or only one of his long-suffering creditors.

"Yes. Is he not at home?" answered Mrs. Maroni, in her quiet, well-bred voice.

"He is not up," said Theresa bluntly. "He never gets up to breakfast."

"If you would kindly send him my card, I think he would see me," said Mrs. Maroni.

"I have done so," said the widow, "but I daresay he is somewhat taken aback—he receives so few visitors. In fact, I may say you are the first he has ever had."

"I have come upon a matter of business," said Mrs. Maroni.

"Oh, indeed!" responded the widow, and the twins exchanged glances expressive of great mistrust.

"He never gives his address to any one," hazarded Theresa, as much as to say—"How did you get it?"

"He gave it to me," said Mrs. Maroni.

And then Mrs. Potter felt that she was in the presence of a rival and not of a creditor.

"It is rather unusual for ladies to call upon gentlemen; is it not?" she said, with what was intended to be a sweet smile.

"It is necessary sometimes," answered Mrs. Maroni coldly; and then Mrs. Potter remarked to herself that this self-possessed person must be a fellow victim.

"Perhaps you know that he has been away?" said Mrs. Potter, anxious to sound her visitor. "He only returned a few weeks ago. We missed him dreadfully, and I think he must have been sorry to lose his many little home comforts. We do not treat him as a

boarder; he is quite like one of ourselves, and I think he is getting quite attached to the children." At this flagrant lie the twins gave a united sniff, which clearly meant that the attachment, if it existed, was not reciprocated. Mrs. Maroni recollected that the description that Malloret had given of his home did not quite tally with that of Mrs. Potter, but she was polite enough to say that it was pleasant for a man to have family surroundings.

"He is going to be married, is he not?" asked Theresa abruptly, and the words made Mrs. Potter blanch to a deadly pallor.

"That is more than I can say," answered Mrs. Maroni, and then added, "Has he told you so?"

"He mentioned something about it," said the girl carelessly, "and he gave ma notice."

"I think he was only in fun," said Mrs. Potter, whose wish was father to the thought. "A gentleman generally knows when he is well off."

"Yes; few people would have considered him a marrying man," said Mrs. Maroni calmly. And then the widow was more baffled than ever.

"What mysterious errand could bring this woman to Clan William Terrace," she thought. "She seemed utterly to ignore the captain's approaching marriage and not to be in the least upset at hearing of it. Why,

then, had she come?" Mrs. Potter felt that she must really put some more searching question.

"You did not mention if you were a relation of Captain Malloret's?" she said rather impertinently, and Mrs. Maroni was sufficiently nettled to reply:

"I sent my card to Captain Malloret; I am not aware that further explanation is necessary."

"Oh, certainly not; I meant no offence," said Mrs. Potter, "only, as I say, being like one of ourselves we naturally take a great interest in him."

"I am sure he must be very grateful," said Mrs. Maroni dryly.

Then there was a silence, during which the twins minutely scrutinized every article of Mrs. Maroni's apparel, to that lady's intense disgust. She had nerved herself for the interview with Captain Malloret, and she longed for it to begin and to be free from the ill-mannered questions of these vulgar people.

"Will you take any refreshment?" said Mrs. Potter, who had hesitated between that remark and observing that it was a fine day. The visitor was not communicative and Mrs. Potter felt that something must be said on general topics.

Before Mrs. Maroni could reply, Captain Malloret entered the room, and she welcomed his advent with a sigh of relief.

"I am delighted to see you, my dear friend," said

the captain, addressing Mrs. Maroni. "Mrs. Potter, will you be good enough——?" But before Malloret could get any further his aggrieved landlady bounced out of the room with the twins at her heels.

"I did not exaggerate the description I gave of that worthy lady?" continued the captain.

"No, I cannot say you did."

"You can scarcely wonder at my wishing to change my condition, and at my longing to join your charming circle."

Mrs. Maroni made no answer, but she felt that she hated Captain Malloret more than ever, and at this eleventh hour she hesitated at linking her unfortunate daughter to such a scoundrel. However, she felt that there was no help for it.

"Well, what have you decided?" said Malloret, unable any longer to restrain his curiosity. "What have you decided? Let me hear."

"I have been thinking over all you have said."

"Yes; well?"

"And I feel half inclined to consent."

"I was sure that you would do so. I will be to your daughter the pearl of husbands; I will indeed."

"Very possibly," said Mrs. Maroni, "but that is not what I came to discuss. I think we had better come to the point at once; probably that will be more agree-

able for both of us. The fact is, Captain Malloret, I have been left no alternative in this matter."

"Don't say that, I beg; don't say that."

"It is quite true, whether I say it or not."

"You must forgive me if my wooing was a little brusque," said Captain Malloret. "The real truth is that I became madly in love with Alice the moment I saw her, and I knew there was no other way to obtain her hand except by acting as I did. I daresay I was wrong, and that you loathe and despise me for it. But, after all, *que voulez-vous?* 'All's fair in love and war,' you know."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Mrs. Maroni with intention, "'all's fair in love and war.'"

"Well, let us understand each other clearly. You have come here to tell me that you give your consent?"

"Yes, I have come here to tell you that I give my consent."

"Have you spoken to Alice? Not that that matters much."

"Yes, I have spoken to Alice."

"And she consents as well?"

"Yes, she consents as well."

"When may the marriage take place?"

"The sooner the better," said Mrs. Maroni. "When a person is compelled to take a plunge it is no use

standing shivering on the brink, and if there is no possibility of avoiding a sacrifice it had better be made at once."

"I entirely agree with you, my dear friend, I entirely agree with you; not that Alice will be in any way sacrificed by her marriage. By uniting herself with me she will secure a most affectionate and loving husband, and one who, if not overburdened with this world's goods, is, at any rate, the heir to a peerage. I really think that she could not have done better. A wiser marriage, nor one in which matters were more evenly balanced, I have never heard or read of."

"I am glad you are satisfied," said Mrs. Maroni.

"Satisfied!" echoed Malloret. "I am more than satisfied, and I promise you that in three months' time you shall hear from your daughter's own lips that she has every cause for contentment."

"We shall see," said Mrs. Maroni.

"And now as to the date of the marriage," he repeated. "When can it take place?"

"Whenever you like."

"In a fortnight, or a month?"

"As I said before, the sooner the better."

"Very well," said the captain; "let us say in a fortnight."

"As you please," said Mrs. Maroni.

"I am the happiest man in all England. You have taken a load of anxiety off my heart."

"Well, I must be going now," said Mrs. Maroni. "Your landlady has strange notions as to the propriety of your receiving visits from ladies."

"Damn my landlady!"

"No, no, pray don't. But I won't detain you any longer at present, although there is a good deal for us to discuss. If you are not better engaged, come and dine with me at Albemarle Street at eight this evening, and we can talk over the settlements and enter into the necessary arrangements. I don't suppose there will be much difficulty in coming to an understanding."

"None whatever; I am sure I can count on your generosity."

"I shall do my duty to my daughter," said Mrs. Maroni. "I have done so from the day she was born and I shall do so till the end. Good morning."

"Well, good morning, if you must be going. Expect me punctually at eight."

And then Captain Malloret saw the woman whom he considered his victim off the premises, and declining to enter into any explanation with Mrs. Potter, who pelted him with inquiries as to his late visitor, he adjourned to a neighbouring restaurant that he had been

in the habit of frequenting when in funds, and ordered a pint of champagne of the choicest vintage that its cellars boasted, in order to drink success to his precious scheme now apparently about to be brought to a promising conclusion.

CHAPTER XX.

HAROLD'S ATTITUDE.

SINCE her mother had left Cornwall Alice had remained in the same state of dazed stupor which had seized her when first she was told of Kingston's death. In vain had her brother tried to rouse her, and by every means in his power distract her from the terrible grief which had blighted her life. Of course he was in complete ignorance of what had really taken place, and so it was that the awkward phrases of consolation he offered his sister were utterly inadequate to deal with the crushing blow the poor girl had received.

When Mrs. Maroni returned home, Harold met her at the station, and by the serious expression on his face she saw at once that he had bad news to give her of her daughter. He told his mother that he considered Alice seriously ill, and that it would not surprise him if her reason gave way under the shock of Kingston's death. Then Mrs. Maroni, who had felt most uncomfortable at having to tell her son of the arrangements that she had made for Alice's marriage,

saw that this would be a favourable opportunity to broach the subject.

"There is only one thing to save her," she said; "she must marry at once."

Harold looked at his mother in utter bewilderment.

"Alice will never marry," he said. "Her whole life is buried in that poor fellow's grave."

Mrs. Maroni hesitated. It was most difficult to explain to him that Malloret, whom they all disliked, had proposed for Alice's hand, and that she had taken upon herself to accept his proposal on Alice's behalf. However, the plunge must be made, and the threatened scandal averted; and having conquered the repugnance she herself had previously entertained when the question of the marriage was first mooted, she must now make others conquer it.

"I don't know if you noticed that Captain Malloret paid her a good deal of attention when he was here," she began nervously; and then she paused.

Harold smiled, and said contemptuously, "We all disliked Malloret, mother, and I am sure that Alice would be the first to declare her dislike."

Then Mrs. Maroni went at it boldly.

"In any case he has proposed to me for her," she said, "and I have told him I will do my best to gain her consent."

"You cannot be serious," said Harold. "Alice

would not dream of marrying him. In the first place he is much too old for her, and then, too, I am sure that for years she will think of no one but Dick."

"I must try my best," said Mrs. Maroni wearily. "It may be the means of saving her life. He is not altogether a desirable *parti*, I admit, but he is a gentleman and heir to a title, and having sown and reaped his wild oats, he may turn out a good husband."

She said the words falteringly and without any conviction. She knew in her heart of hearts that the man to whom she was giving her daughter was a scoundrel, and that Alice could have no possible prospect of happiness with him; but anything was better than her being doomed to a life of wretchedness such as she herself had experienced—a life of shame and terror of being found out, the feeling that by one false step you had lost all right to the society of decent people, and were an object of scorn to be pointed at by every person who accidentally discovered your secret.

"You will never gain her consent," said Harold. "It is the wildest idea I have ever heard of; and I must say I marvel at my clever mother proposing such a scheme."

"It is the only one I can think of," said Mrs. Maroni. And then as they were nearing the house

she added, "You must leave me alone with her. I will speak to her at once and see how she takes it."

* * * * *

When Harold heard that his sister had consented to marry Malloret he was even more surprised than when his mother first made the suggestion to him.

"It is incredible," he said. "What can you have said to her?"

"I used every argument in my power," answered Mrs. Maroni, who felt quite unequal to making an explanation. "Of course, she was obdurate at first, but I told her it was the only thing to save her reason, and that no amount of regrets or weeping would bring her dead lover to life again, and that an absolute change of scene and surroundings was imperative for her."

Then, later on, Harold questioned his sister, and was surprised to see that she had in a great measure thrown off that dangerous lethargy which she had shown during her mother's absence in London. She seemed to have entirely changed, to have suddenly become a woman in place of the heart-broken girl he had seen a few hours since. The fact was that now that she heard the marriage would really take place, that Malloret had remained obdurate in exacting her hand as the price of his silence, Alice had nerved herself for the worst, and made up her mind to be brave.

She knew that all happiness had gone from her own life, but for the sake of her dearly-loved brother she would try and hide from him the full extent of her sacrifice.

When Harold asked her if she loved, or thought she could love, Malloret, she smiled a sad smile and shook her head and said that he knew she could never love any one but the man who had met his death in the cruel river. And then adopting her mother's line of deceit, and always under the dread that Harold might be suspicious as to her sudden consent, she argued that as her mother had all her life sacrificed herself to them and had never had a thought but for their welfare, and that as she earnestly wished that this marriage should take place, she would do her duty and obey her. Harold marvelled and was but half convinced, but still there was nothing to be done. He had heard his sister say with her own lips that she was ready to marry Captain Malloret, and wished the marriage to take place as soon as possible; and all that he could do was to be astonished and wish his sister happiness in a doubtful sort of way.

In the evening Mrs. Maroni sat down and wrote to Captain Malloret. She told him that she had gained her daughter's consent, not, however, without considerable difficulty. Still the consent was gained, and that was everything. "She mourns a little for Mr. Kings-

ton," she said. "They had a sort of boy and girl flirtation, which I daresay would have ripened into something like love if the unhappy young man had lived. However, one cannot speculate on what might have been. You have our joint consents, and I suppose that you had better come here for a few days and pay us a visit. It is necessary that you should know each other better before binding yourselves together for life, and if you will let me know upon which day you will arrive, I will send to meet you at the station."

There was a lurking triumph in her eyes as she wrote this letter. As she closed it and put on the stamp, she said to herself, "Thank goodness, Stephen Malloret, we shall soon be quits."

CHAPTER XXI.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE WEDDING.

WHEN Captain Malloret received Mrs. Maroni's letter he felt that his triumph was complete. At length he was going to resume his proper position in the world, and by the most desirable means possible—a young and beautiful wife and plenty of money. What more could he wish for? Nothing. And in his own vanity he felt that the reward he was reaping was only his just due. He had had a long spell of bad luck, but at last the clouds were breaking, and he saw before him a horizon clear and promising. His debts would all be paid, and he would be free once more. He would have no more Potters to worry him; and, to add to his satisfaction, he read in the morning paper that his uncle, the Earl of Kingsborough, was dangerously ill.

“After all,” he thought to himself, “why should I go through life persecuted by duns and cut by everybody? I have only outspent my income, and that's not a crime which deserves life-long punishment.” His conscience passed over many little incidents in his

career, which most of his former acquaintances would have characterized as more than shady, and he only admitted to himself that he had been unlucky. He had backed wrong horses and made unfortunate speculations, and he had suffered for his folly. Now, thanks to the cleverness that he had displayed in his encounters with Mrs. Maroni, he had put an end to all that. His uncle was probably dying, and instead of coming into an empty title with no money to keep it up, he would have a charming countess to share his honours and plenty of money to pay off the large sums he had borrowed on his reversion. All seemed bright to him on this particular morning, and it was with every feeling of pride and satisfaction that he determined to interview his landlady and bid her an eternal farewell. Captain Malloret informed the gushing widow at breakfast that he wished to see her alone at the termination of that meal, and Mrs. Potter trembled as she wondered what new shock might be in store for her. The twins remained silent. They had watched him narrowly all the morning and they felt that there was mischief in the air. His high spirits and reckless jokes only too well foreboded a catastrophe of a crushing nature when he asked to see Mrs. Potter alone—laying great stress on the word alone. They now thought their fears were to be speedily realized, and it was another grudge that they nursed against

him when they learnt that they were not to be present at the interview he was to have with their mother.

Malloret did not attempt to beat about the bush with his long-suffering landlady. He knew his power, and determined to make use of it. As soon as "Mariar" had cleared away the breakfast things and the twins had been despatched to their lessons, he said:

"Mrs. Potter, I am about to leave you—for ever. I am going to be married."

Mrs. Potter opened her mouth as if about to speak, but words refused to come to her assistance, and she remained gasping.

"Yes," continued Malloret; "I have taken the excellent advice you gave me some time ago. I have proposed, and I have been accepted. It only remains for me to thank you for your unswerving kindness and for your patience in waiting so long for your bill, and to assure you that within a month you will be paid every farthing I owe you."

Mrs. Potter still gasped, the joy of having her bill paid in full being so cruelly mitigated by the announcement of her lodger's approaching marriage that she still felt unequal to give vent to her feelings in words. At last she stammered forth:

"It is to that hussy who called here the other day!"

Malloret could not help smiling. The idea of the stately Mrs. Maroni being called a hussy by the vulgar Mrs. Potter was too much for his gravity.

"You have never seen the lady I am about to marry," said he; "and I have not been in the habit of receiving 'hussies' during the time I have lived in your house."

Then he proceeded to be more explanatory, and condescended to tell Mrs. Potter that his late visitor was his future mother-in-law, and that his bride-elect had a large fortune. There would be no longer any occasion for her to trust—her period of trust was finished. He would pay her as soon as the settlements were made, and then he pointed to the paragraph in the newspaper which spoke of his uncle's illness.

"You see I am altogether in luck's way," he continued; and Mrs. Potter heaved a sigh and declared that men always were in luck's way, and that it was only lone widows like herself who put their trust in deceiving men and found out their mistake when it was too late.

Malloret then advised her to follow his example. He reminded her that she had told him of the many offers she had received since the late Mr. Potter's death, and he strongly urged her to accept one of them without further delay.

After that there was nothing further to be said.

He wrote to Mrs. Maroni and told her that he would be at Pencarvon the next day, and his last hours in London he spent far from the worries of Clan William Terrace.

The twins were up betimes to see him off the next morning, and gave him sarcastic congratulations as they bade him good-bye. Theresa wished him much happiness, and regretted that she could not offer him a wedding present, adding with great malice that perhaps when "ma" received his promised cheque she would be able to do so. Augustus was less spiteful, and contented himself by wringing a promise from the captain that when he came into his "estate" he would invite him there to shoot. Alone Mrs. Potter's regrets were sincere. As she pressed Malloret's hand for the last time, the tears came into her eyes, and she feebly sobbed that if he was not happy with his wife, and ever wanted a home and a welcome, he would know where to find them. Malloret, villain as he was, could not help being touched by the poor woman's kindness, and his final sight of the family left him with a more favourable impression than he had ever entertained of them.

In the evening Malloret was at Pencarvon, and had a long talk with Mrs. Maroni about his future life. His mother-in-law elect was all smiles and graciousness. She also had seen the paragraph concerning his uncle's

illness, and for the moment cherished a hope that it might make some difference in his matrimonial project with Alice. But he told her frankly that he had anticipated every penny that he would otherwise have come into at his uncle's death, and that all that he would inherit would be an empty title. Mrs. Maroni reassured him by saying that the fortune which she proposed to give her daughter would amply suffice for their wants.

Then Malloret became more familiar, and inquired what the exact sum was that she proposed to give. Mrs. Maroni said:

"I am a woman of business in all things, as you know, and the money I give will be strictly settled on your children. You will have a good income, but there will be no capital for you to squander."

"I shall be quite content to have an income," laughed Malloret. "It is so long since I have had one that it will have the double charm to me of affluence and novelty."

"If Alice had married a man with any money I should have given her twenty thousand pounds," said Mrs. Maroni; "but as you are absolutely penniless, and will probably shortly have to keep up a title, I will settle forty thousand pounds upon her and allow her an extra five hundred pounds a year out of what Monsieur de Tesles gives me."

Malloret declared that nothing could be fairer or

more generous, and indeed he was profuse in his thanks.

"It is thoroughly understood," said Mrs. Maroni, "that the forty thousand pounds is settled on any children born after your marriage."

"I quite understand that," said Malloret, "and I am thankful that it should be so. I shall be out of the way of temptation myself, and any little beggars that come after me will be mercifully provided for."

Mrs. Maroni was delighted at the clever way in which she had managed things. She had feared that he might want to have money given to him outright to pay off sundry debts, but he had made no such demand—the fact being that he knew he was marrying into a rich family, and that he held his mother-in-law under his thumb and could make her open her purse strings whenever he thought proper to do so.

After the business details had been completed he asked her if she thought Alice would ever care for him, and what means Mrs. Maroni had used to induce her daughter to consent to the marriage. Mrs. Maroni was very brief on this point, and answered that the girl was heart-whole; she had no experience of the world and had seen but few men. Mrs. Maroni had told her that Malloret was a great friend of her father's, and that if there was a slight disparity in their ages it was a fault on the right side.

Mallorete was content to accept this explanation. In fact he scarcely listened to it; he was thinking all the time how clever he had been and what a particularly fortunate meeting it was when he saw Helen de Tesles in Bond Street after an interval of fifteen years. The only thing which made him at all nervous was the presence of Harold. Alice's brother had greeted him coldly—almost rudely—and it was very evident that the match did not meet with his approval. But, after all, that could not be helped. He looked upon Harold as a young cub who would learn better manners in time, and he trusted to Mrs. Maroni's unerring cleverness to smooth away the difficulties. In his first interview with Alice it became apparent to him at once that Mrs. Maroni's arguments and comments must have been very forcible to induce the girl to accept him. She was iciness itself in her manner, and not only indifference, but positive dislike was displayed in everything she said. It was useless to think of making love to such a statue, and he abandoned the attempt at once. When first he touched nervously on the question Alice replied:

"My mother wishes me to marry you, and I will obey her, but let us leave love out of the question, please."

Mallorete shrugged his shoulders. In reality he cared no more about the girl than she did for him.

She was young, and certainly pretty, and had plenty of money. They could be perfectly happy without love, he argued. He must look upon it as a *mariage de convenance*—such a one as is made every day in France, and which invariably turns out happier than a runaway love match. Still, it was necessary that there should be some kind of love making. The girl looked pale and worried, more like a corpse than a bride-elect, thought Malloret, but still he persisted in his wooing, and walked about the grounds with her while her mother was doing her best to reconcile Harold to the strangeness of the situation. In the evening the two men smoked together and played billiards, and Harold did his best to conquer the dislike he felt for his future brother-in-law, and Malloret did everything in his power to assist him. The elder man made himself as agreeable to the younger as he possibly could, speaking in terms of enthusiastic rapture of Alice and her mother, and he quite discarded the tone of bluster and cynicism which he had adopted on his former visit. Harold almost liked him at the end of two or three days. He was so unobtrusive, and so kind to his mother, and he really seemed to worship Alice. Harold thought that perhaps he had misjudged him, and that after all his mother's advice had been right. It was towards the end of the first week of his stay that there arrived the news of the death of his uncle.

Lord Kingsborough had departed this life and Malloret was now a "belted earl." Neither Harold nor Alice appeared much affected at the news, and Malloret bore his grief with stoic equanimity. Mrs. Maroni was [the only person who really showed any emotion on the occasion. Her triumph would be more complete than ever. She was under the impression that Kingston's child—if a boy—would be the next earl, and she was so delighted that she could only talk of the old man's death all day.

On the morrow Malloret left to attend the funeral and Alice appeared to feel intense relief at his departure. Her mother could not help noticing it, and she asked her if the man were really so utterly distasteful to her.

"You must know that he is," replied Alice. "But I shall perform my part of the bargain, and I have determined not to go back upon my word."

"Your bargain will be a very short one," said Mrs. Maroni. "You will leave him at the church door, or almost immediately afterwards."

Alice did not answer. She thought that fate had been very cruel to her, but it was no use repining. She must be sacrificed rather than disgrace should be brought upon the mother and brother she so dearly loved.

It was settled that as soon as Malloret returned the

marriage preparations should commence. The fact of his uncle's death would account for the ceremony being a private one, but there was no necessity for putting it off. The uncle and nephew had not been on speaking terms for some years, and an affectation of grief would only be ridiculous, so it was decided that the wedding should take place in London in a fortnight's time. Harold was to give away his sister, and there were to be no bridesmaids and no festivities of any kind. Immediately after the wedding ceremony they would return to the hotel and have a *partie carrée* breakfast and then the bride and the bridegroom would depart for Paris. At least this was Malloret's proposal, and it appeared to meet with Mrs. Maroni's entire approval. She reserved to herself the surprise her enemy would experience at the few words she would say to him after the breakfast, and as to the trip to Paris, that would be rather doubtful after the news she had to tell him. But in the meantime he was quite at liberty to make his own arrangements, only she would have the last word after the ceremony had been performed.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE WEDDING.

THE Maronis were in London a week before the wedding took place. There was plenty of shopping to be got through and several visits to the lawyers were paid before the settlements were finally signed. Lord Kingsborough made no difficulty in accepting Mrs. Maroni's suggestion that the income of the £40,000 she was to settle on Alice should be paid to her absolutely. He felt so sure of his prey, so certain that whenever he wanted money he would only have to ask his wife for it, that he graciously acceded to all plans made by Mrs. Maroni.

They were on excellent terms, these two; all signs of the violent storms which had passed between them had disappeared. Helen was nursing her revenge, which she felt to be more than ever complete since the death of his uncle, and whenever Kingsborough touched upon this topic and chaffingly told Mrs. Maroni that her good luck pursued her in everything, and what had promised to be a bad marriage for her

daughter had now turned into an almost brilliant one, she was quite ready to acquiesce, and to admit with apparent frankness that she had very possibly misjudged him. Alice, however, did not share this view. Miss Maroni continued to be cold and unsympathetic; she could scarcely be decently civil to the man she was about to call her husband, and when her mother remonstrated with her, she declared that she was powerless to alter her manner. Whenever she could escape from his presence she did so. She endeavoured to be as much with her brother as possible, and together they visited the sights of London, none of which they had either of them ever seen. Mrs. Maroni made all possible excuses for her to Kingsborough. She enlarged on the great affection the brother and sister had for each other, and that it was only natural that they should wish to see as much as possible of each other prior to their separation. And then she continued, with some little touch of malice, that as Kingsborough and Alice had all their lives to look forward to in close companionship, the bridegroom need not grudge the bride her last few days of freedom. Kingsborough quite agreed with this. He knew that it was not a marriage of love, and he laughed at the excuses which Mrs. Maroni prepared with so much elaboration.

"Your daughter does not love me," he said. "I have no illusion on the subject; she may possibly do

so in the future. I have conquered many hearts in my day, and I do not despair of conquering hers."

Mrs. Maroni smiled at the conceit of his remark, and could not refrain from saying:

"I suppose amongst your conquests you include Mrs. Potter?"

Lord Kingsborough shuddered.

"No," he said, "I do not count Mrs. Potter as a conquest; I look upon her as a prolonged nightmare—a nightmare from which you have at length delivered me."

"You are very ungrateful," she said.

"I am not ungrateful to you," he answered. "I think you have behaved nobly, and you will see what model son-in-law I shall make you."

"Yes, we shall see," said Mrs. Maroni drily.

On another occasion Kingsborough asked her why de Tesles was not to be invited to the wedding.

Mrs. Maroni replied that she could give no valid reason for inviting him, even if he cared to come, which was doubtful. The wedding was to be a strictly private one, in consequence of old Lord Kingsborough's death, and she could have no excuse for asking a stranger—which he must be to her children—to assist at the function.

Alice had also asked her mother the same question. She had no desire to see the man who had treated

her mother badly, but she thought it possible that he might wish to be present and insist on his right.

Mrs. Maroni told her that he had no right. He was the father of her children, but they did not bear his name, and his presence would only be the cause of unpleasant inquiries on the part of Harold.

The wedding morning dawned dull and gloomy, and when Alice looked out of the window she saw that a wretched drizzling rain was falling, well in keeping with her own spirits. The marriage was performed at St. Paul's, Knightsbridge, by special licence, and as the bride and bridegroom drove back to the hotel along Piccadilly they presented more the appearance of returning from a funeral than of two loving hearts just bound together in the holy bonds of wedlock. Alice wore everyday costume. She steadfastly refused to don the usual bride's attire, and her mother had agreed that for so private an occasion it would have been altogether out of place. Harold was almost as silent and depressed as his sister, and was glad when the whole thing was over, and at the prospect of returning to Pencarvon by the afternoon express. The champagne at the breakfast failed to raise the drooping spirits of the marriage party. Mrs. Maroni was nervous and absent; she could only think of the scene that was in store for her with Kingsborough, and wonder which would be the most crushing way of telling him the

truth. Alice was thankful that the worst part of the day had been got through, and that, thanks to her mother, she would in a few hours be free, free to think only of her dead love, and go somewhere far, far away from the man whom she had just sworn to love, honour and obey, and who in her heart she thoroughly loathed and despised.

In vain Kingsborough attempted to be cheerful and to raise the pall of unutterable gloom which hung over the wedding breakfast. Harold paid no attention to him, and Mrs. Maroni listened absently to his would-be funny stories and generally managed to smile in the wrong place. Alice looked like a spectre-bride; her husband thought her paleness was almost alarming, and her listlessness and languor boded ill for the approaching delights of the honeymoon.

It was a relief to them all when Harold declared that his time was up, and that he must be off to catch his train. For the first time that day, Mrs. Maroni showed some emotion as she wished her son good-bye. The future might still be dark and full of danger, and she almost broke down as she kissed him passionately and said in hysterical sobs that whatever happened she still had her darling son left to her. Harold was surprised at this outburst of feeling, but Mrs. Maroni begged him to leave at once, and turned away to the

window to see the last of his handsome face as his cab bore him rapidly away in the direction of the South Western Station.

Then Alice went to change her dress, and Mrs. Maroni and Lord Kingsborough were left alone.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CHECK AND CHECKMATE.

It was an awful moment for Mrs. Maroni. She felt herself trembling all over, but she determined not to flinch, and to spare no one in her exulting moment of revenge.

Kingsborough had sat down at a table and was writing some letters, and appeared to take no notice of the fact that Helen was in the room, and this gave her time to collect herself and prepare what she had to say. Mrs. Maroni idly took up the *Morning Post* to give herself a countenance, and after appearing to scan its contents for a few moments, she looked up and said:

"There are a few words I should like to say to you, Lord Kingsborough, before you leave, and when you have finished your letters please let me know, as I think my communication may be interesting to you."

Her voice trembled as she began, but she soon recovered herself, and laying down her paper looked him coolly in the face.

Kingsborough finished an address he was writing, and turning round with a bland smile, he said:

"I am all attention, my dear madam."

"It is difficult for me to begin," she said, "but as you are such a thorough man of the world you will probably be better able to understand what I have to say than would a man who knew less of the weakness and foibles of human nature."

"I suppose it is the usual homily from the mother-in-law," he said laughing. "I imagined that you were going to spare me such a discourse, especially as that sort of thing has been played out in opera-bouffes."

"It is not a homily," said Mrs. Maroni. "I am afraid homilies would be lost upon you; at any rate I don't mean to waste my breath by trying the effect of one. No, it is more with the past that I have to deal than with the future."

"I thought we were to let bygones be bygones," he said; "you told me so at Pencarvon."

"It will depend upon you whether they are to be forgotten," she answered. "I am afraid I shall have to speak at some length, and before I come to the end you may possibly be tired; but at least I will make my statement as short as I can, and I promise that I will do my best to interest you."

"You are most enigmatical," he said; "you talk like a soothsayer. However, pray proceed, for, as

they say in the dramas, 'your story strangely interests me.' "

"I hope this one may," she said drily; and then she began: "When you proposed for my daughter, you made no attempt to convince me that you were in love with her. You coveted her money, and you threatened me that if I did not coerce her into marrying you, you would reveal my miserable past to my unsuspecting children."

"Pray don't travel over old forgotten ground," he said.

"Please don't interrupt me," she said. "I must do so to make my story complete. The advantages you had to offer were decidedly few, but you knew the affection I bore my children, and you successfully traded on it. But—there is always a but in these cases—I had defied you and told you to do your worst, and you must surely have been surprised when I suddenly turned round and gave my consent."

"I was certainly agreeably surprised," he said, "but I knew you to be a clever woman, and I thought you had realized the advantage that it would be to you for your daughter to marry me. I am of good birth; your daughter—as I told you at Pencarvon—is lucky to marry a man bearing an old title. My only crime is poverty, and that crime your liberality has effaced."

"Exactly. We will pass over the blackmailing, the

scoundrel's threats, the shameless dishonesty of it all, and merely look upon it as a *mariage de convenance*. That it was one, in every sense of the word, you will presently see."

"What is all this leading up to?" said Kingsborough impatiently.

"It is leading up to my capital point," said Mrs. Maroni. "You know enough of diplomacy to be aware that ruse must be met by ruse, and that when men set traps for others, they often fall into them themselves."

"Oh damn it all, Helen, what are you driving at?" cried Kingsborough rising and walking towards her.

"You have often admitted that I am not a fool?" she continued unmoved.

"You are talking like one now," he answered rudely.

"I don't think so," she said; "and I fancy that you will retract that statement by-and-by. We will admit for the sake of argument that I am not a fool; how, then, do you account for my allowing Alice to marry you? You, a blackmailer, a man with no reputation, cut by all London, and living on the shame of a degraded woman! I mean myself of course. It was not the brilliancy of your title that tempted me, it was not fear for myself. Shall I tell you what it was?"

"I wish you would leave off talking nonsense," was all he said.

Mrs. Maroni laughed. "You will see if it is nonsense," she said, and then she continued, still in her cold measured tones, "you are proud of your birth and title, are you not?"

"Of course I am," he answered; "why should I not be?"

"Well; it is an excellent old name, and up to your time has always been honourably borne, as far as I know."

"You are very severe," he said.

"Fortunately," she continued, "it is just possible that after your time it may continue to be so borne, as—and here comes in what I have been gradually leading up to—it is extremely improbable that your heir will have any of your blood in his veins."

"What do you mean?" said Kingsborough, at last becoming interested.

"I cannot put it plainer," answered Mrs. Maroni.

Then there was a pause. Kingsborough's brain set to work, and he imagined that she meant that Alice would not live with him, and that although she was now his wife by law, she would refuse to be so in anything but name.

"You must really be more clear," he said, and he sat down opposite her.

"I am sorry your intelligence is so limited," she said, "as it is most painful to me to have to explain

what you might yourself have guessed. However, as you wish me to continue I will do so. You noticed, I think, that a visitor at my house, Mr. Kingston, paid Alice a great deal of attention. I had not thought much about it myself, but then you see you are so much cleverer than I; you see much farther—at any rate, you did notice it, and spoke to me on the subject. You were right and I was wrong.” Then Mrs. Maroni got up, and walking straight up to him, she said with a fiendish glare in her eyes: “So right were you, that Geoffrey Kingston, who lies buried in Pencarvon churchyard, is the father of your unborn heir, and in marrying my daughter to you, I have merely consulted my own convenience. I have closed your slanderous mouth, and punished you for the agony you have been causing me.”

“You devil!” was all that Kingsborough could ejaculate.

Then Mrs. Maroni burst forth in the full flush of her triumph.

“Yes, a devil who has outwitted you, and touched you on the only sensible chord you possess. Your game was a charming one, simple and manly! Anything can be done by threats, and God knows what might have happened if I had not bravely faced the worst and told my daughter my own story. She knows everything—all my past life, all the anguish you have

made me endure. And when she confessed to me that she had privately married Geoffrey Kingston, and I realized that she had done so in a false name, and that therefore her marriage was not legal, she saw at once the advantage to be gained by marrying you. Your slander can no longer touch us, and my daughter's reputation is saved!"

Lord Kingsborough was completely staggered, he scarcely knew what to say. The whole past explained itself so easily to him now. What a fool he had been to be taken in by this calculating woman. She stood there before him revelling in his discomfiture, and he was beside himself with rage. At last he stammered out:

"You are a pretty pair, you and your bastard daughter!"

"Yes, we only wanted you to make the family complete," sneered Mrs. Maroni quite unmoved.

He was dazed, completely stunned by the news, and could think of nothing to say. Abuse was of no use; he felt he could strangle her.

"And now that you know all," continued his mother-in-law, "perhaps we had better discuss the future. What do you intend to do?"

"Do? I'll divorce her," he thundered.

"You can't," said Mrs. Maroni quietly.

"I'll never live with her," he said.

"She has no desire that you should," said Mrs. Maroni. "As you have probably seen she hates the very sight of you."

And then a gleam of hope lit up his face, and Kingsborough said as a gentle feeler:

"And her brother, did he lend his precious aid to this delightful scheme?"

Mrs. Maroni did not answer. It was the one thing she dreaded, that Harold's name might be drawn into the discussion.

"I presume by your silence that he is in ignorance of the plot?" said Kingsborough.

"Alice knows everything," said Mrs. Maroni; "but it was unnecessary for me to tell her brother."

"Exactly," said Kingsborough with a latent look of triumph in his eyes. "It was altogether unnecessary. And now that you have played your last card, and had your laugh, I think it is about time that I had a look in. I have still a trump left in my hand, and I mean to play it."

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Maroni.

"I mean that I shall telegraph to Harold to come up at once, and that I shall explain the whole situation to him; and be guided by his advice."

"You would not do that," said Mrs. Maroni faintly.

"Would not!" he echoed. "You will see; women are very clever, and you are a brilliant example of

your sex, but even you have over-reached yourself. In twelve hours Harold shall know that his mother is a liar and a wanton, and that his sister is little better than her mother. When he ascertains that he has no name, and that he has all along lived on the generosity of his mother's lover, perhaps he will be a trifle more civil to his brother-in-law—at any rate we shall see."

This was a crushing blow for which Mrs. Maroni was totally unprepared. In her eagerness to save her daughter, and at the same time humiliate her enemy, she had overlooked the fact that in his rage and desperation he might still play his *va tout* of informing Harold of the true state of things. It had been a ghastly oversight, but still she clung to a wild hope that what he said was only a temporary outburst of anger; and that by persuasion, and possibly money, she might still avert the catastrophe. She determined not to show her fear, and kept up her brave demeanour as she said:

"You forget that all the money I have settled, has been settled on Alice, and that were you to act in any way inimical to me, you would not touch a penny of it."

"I don't want your money," he answered. "I want to let your son know the trick that has been played upon me, and we will see after that what is to be done."

"You could not be such a brute," said Mrs. Maroni in a low voice.

Lord Kingsborough laughed aloud. "Upon my word you are too simple," he said. "I am to be played upon by you and your daughter, to be made the victim in a disgraceful and shameful marriage, and all the fun is to be on your side! Oh dear, no—there must be a family meeting, a *conseil de famille*, as they say in France, and Harold must be the first one bidden to it."

"Harold shall never know my story," said Mrs. Maroni. "I would kill myself first."

"Then you had better decide as to the least painful way of doing so at once," he said coolly, "for know it he will within the next few hours."

"You cannot mean what you say," wailed Mrs. Maroni. "The money shall be yours, every penny of it; you need never see Alice or me again."

"I don't intend to," he said, "after Harold has been told the sort of woman you are; but he must be told first." And then he added: "I don't think it is any use to prolong this discussion. I am going out, and I have no wish to see you again till I meet you in the presence of your son."

With these parting words he took up his hat and walked slowly out of the room.

Mrs. Maroni remained stunned. In all her calcula-

tions she had not counted on this terrible change. What could she do? How could she avert a meeting between the two men? She had vaguely thought, whenever the idea occurred to her, that perhaps one day he might round on her by threatening to tell Harold, but that money might silence him, and she had even determined that she would make any sacrifice rather than Harold should be told of their dreadful plot. But he had refused money—refused it contemptuously, and longed only for revenge; a revenge that would be so terrible that death alone could give her any escape from it.

She thought of Harold, of his engagement to Miss Perry, of all his hopes in life blighted, and the room seemed to reel round her as she wondered what he would say when he learnt that he was nameless, and that his sister had conceived and with her mother's assistance executed this dreadful plot. There was no possible means of stopping Lord Kingsborough now. Even if she started herself for Cornwall, and prevented the two men meeting, he might still write to her son. What could she do? She determined at length to join Alice and confide in her, telling her the terrible fix they were in, and having a vague hope that perhaps she might be able to suggest some way out of the difficulty.

But Alice gave her no consolation; she was power-

less to suggest anything. She knew nothing of the world, and could only shed bitter tears and wring her hands. Surely a strange end to a wedding, and one which promised but little happiness for the chief actors in this uncanny performance.

CHAPTER XXIV.

KINGSBOROUGH'S REVENGE.

LORD KINGSBOROUGH lost no time in carrying out his threat. When he left Mrs. Maroni he walked straight to a telegraph office in Piccadilly and sent a message to Harold, urging him to return to town at once. He was so completely lost to every feeling but that of hatred and fury, that he did not even think of the consequences of his action. He had been duped, gulled, and made a complete fool of by two designing women, and it was now his turn to show them the sort of man they had conspired against. Mrs. Maroni had been deuced sharp, but he flattered himself that he was even a trifle sharper than she. He was proud of his title, and it gave him a certain feeling of confidence when he reflected that he was risking a large fortune by declaring war with his mother-in-law. After sending the telegram he walked moodily about until it was time to dine, and then, after eating a most *recherché* repast and drinking copiously of champagne, he strolled into the Empire Theatre and spent a generally festive evening.

The night, which was a terrible one to Mrs. Maroni and her daughter, brought no reflection to him. He still thirsted for his revenge as he dressed himself the next morning, and carefully prepared the speeches which he knew would ruin Mrs. Maroni and strike despair to her son.

After breakfast Mrs. Maroni sought him out, and again made a passionate appeal to him for mercy, but he would not listen to her. In vain she tempted him with money, in vain she cajoled and took every line she could think of; Lord Kingsborough remained obdurate.

"You have had your victory," was all he said; "I must have mine."

Mrs. Maroni at length saw that it was useless to persevere. Her son must know all—that son to whom she had sacrificed everything, and allowed Alice to sacrifice everything, that son for whom she had willingly immured herself in the country for fifteen long years, that son who worshipped her as she worshipped him. A whole life's work would be undone by one fell stroke from this despicable villain. It was too horrible—would he have no pity for her? Was there not one gleam of honour left in his composition? To all her appeals he had remained dumb, and she knew that she must face the worst, that Harold would be told her early life, and she could only think how he would bear it. He would

not credit it, she knew; he would give Kingsborough the lie direct; but she felt that she had no longer the power to play the part she had played all her life. If her son questioned her she must tell him the truth. He must be her judge; and she could only pray that he would be a lenient one. As the time approached for his arrival she became terribly nervous. Over and over again the thought occurred to her of braving it out, of denying every one of her enemy's accusations and telling Harold that it was only a new form of *chantage* that he had employed to get more money from her. But this, upon reflection, appeared utterly hopeless; Alice would tell the truth, and there was nothing to be done but to plead extenuating circumstances and hope that his great love for her might make him her champion instead of her judge.

She begged Alice not to be present at the interview between the two men, and Alice had willingly acquiesced in this arrangement. Mrs. Maroni had even gone further, and had written to Léon de Tesles, explaining the situation and begging that he would receive his daughter in Paris. It would be impossible for Alice to return to Cornwall, she declared, and she and Harold must do so; that was, if her son still looked upon her with affection after the scene about to take place. Harold was to arrive at four o'clock, and his mother determined that she must see him before Kings-

borough made his appearance. She would not touch upon the story of her life, but she would prepare him for the shock, and tell him that she hoped her early errors had been redeemed by the devotion she had always shown her children.

She had scarcely time to make these opening remarks when Kingsborough appeared, spruce and smiling, and eager to deal Mrs. Maroni what he considered her death blow.

Mrs. Maroni had told Harold enough for him to know that Lord Kingsborough's errand was not a pleasant one, and that the communication which he had to make was one of a particularly awful nature.

"I have thought it only right, Mr. Maroni," began his lordship, "that as there are grave family questions to be discussed, you should be present at the discussion," and then he went glibly on and told Harold of the shameless trick that had been played upon him by his mother and sister.

Harold listened open-mouthed. At first he felt inclined to order the man out of the room as he heard his mother and sister assailed, but the calm air of the speaker, and the bent, humiliated attitude of his mother proved to him that he had better listen on to the end. As Kingsborough concluded the story of his marriage with Alice, he said:

"I ought certainly to have been on my guard against

your mother, knowing her as I did better than any man in London."

Then Harold was fairly roused. He had listened with shame to the story of his sister's conduct, but against his mother he would not hear one word. He loved her as only such a mother could be loved, and Lord Kingsborough must be careful what he said.

"We will leave my mother out of the question," he said; "she acted for the best, even though in doing so she may have been ill-advised."

"Unfortunately we cannot leave her out of the question," said his brother-in-law. "It was especially that you should see her in her true light that I summoned you here to-day."

"Enough," said Harold; "I see my mother in the way I choose to see her, and it concerns you in no way."

Mrs. Maroni breathed a sigh of relief, and shot one more imploring glance at Kingsborough, but he was not to be baulked of his prey, and continued:

"Twenty years ago your mother was a dishonoured woman, as your sister is in my judgment to-day, only she found no flat ready to marry her, and continued a life of vicious indulgence until she was satiated with it, and took her two precious bastards to the country."

Mrs. Maroni uttered one despairing wail and hid her face in her hands, whilst Harold flew at Kings-

borough like a tiger, and seizing him by the throat, exclaimed:

“You lie, you cur! Take back those lies before I cram them down your loathsome throat.”

Mrs. Maroni sprang to her feet and separated the two men.

“It is not true,” she said, “at least, all he has said is not true. Listen to me, Harold, I will tell you the truth from beginning to end.”

“It is true—every word of it is true,” said Lord Kingsborough. “Ask her where her money comes from, the money on which you and your sister have been reared in luxury. Ask her where your father is buried?”—and then he laughed. “Why, your father is Léon de Tesles, and is living now in Paris and allows his mistress £5,000 a year, and that mistress is your mother.”

Then Mrs. Maroni knew that all was over. Kingsborough had done his worst, and she saw the words strike home to Harold as he put his hand to his head and reeled to a seat.

She was the first one to recover her presence of mind, and she said in a calm and steady voice:

“Have you said enough? Is your revenge complete?”

Kingsborough did not answer. He stood there

fuming with rage and began to feel rather angry with himself now that all was over.

"I don't wish to be hard on her," he said presently, turning to Harold. "I daresay your mother will find some excuse for her conduct, but I think it only right that you should know the sort of woman——"

But Harold stopped him. "I have but one feeling for my mother," he said; "she has taught me to love and respect her, and as long as I live I shall continue to do so."

And then he pointed to the door. Kingsborough felt that it was useless to remain. He had had his moment of victory, but at present it scarcely looked like an overwhelming one. Still, he had left a strong element of discord between them, and he took up his hat with a malignant smile and said:

"Good-bye, Helen. I dare say we shall meet again some day," and then turning to Harold he added, "Good-bye, Mr. ——, I really don't know your right name—you had better ask your mother to give you one," and he was gone.

CHAPTER XXV.

HAROLD'S DETERMINATION.

THERE was an awkward silence between Mrs. Maroni and her son as Lord Kingsborough left the room. Harold was pale and he trembled violently. He had scarcely, as yet, realized the full horror of what he had heard, but his feelings had evidently changed towards his mother. He avoided looking at her, and after nervously fidgeting about the room for a few minutes he said in a tone which Mrs. Maroni scarcely recognized as his:

"I think I will return to Cornwall this evening. What are you going to do, mother?"

Mrs. Maroni told him that she must occupy herself with her daughter's future. She would return to Cornwall in a few days, but before she did so she should have to settle as to Alice's future life. At that moment she did not dare speak to him of his father. She would have liked to tell him that it was probable that Alice would go to Paris, at any rate, for the present, but she did not dare to mention the name of Léon de Tesles in connection with her visit.

She asked him if he would see his sister before he left, but Harold replied in the negative. His brain was in a whirl, and he felt unequal to a fresh scene. He must have time to consider matters and to make some plans. And then he thought of his engagement to Marian which, of course, would now have to be broken off. He could not continue engaged to a girl under the new circumstances. He had no name to offer her, and no fortune. One thing he had already decided, and that was to renounce all claim to the money of the man who had betrayed his mother. The parting was a cold one between these two. Mrs. Maroni was too nervous to make any demonstration of affection and Harold was still too bewildered to be quite sure how to act. He did not even kiss her as she left the room to join Alice; he stood moodily looking out of the window and Mrs. Maroni felt that her punishment was indeed more than she could bear as she gave her last despairing glance at his sorrow-stricken face.

Harold reached "The House" early the next morning, and on his journey he had made up his mind how he would act. He must first call on the Perrys and explain to them as briefly as possible the misfortune which had befallen him. After that he would leave Cornwall for ever. He was young and had all the world before him. He must work; he must earn his

own livelihood and be no longer dependent on the Frenchman's charity. Upon one point he had firmly made up his mind; he would not pain his mother by asking her any further questions. He felt that the story he had heard from Kingsborough's venomous lips was in the main true. Indeed his mother had not attempted to deny it—she had said "it is not all true," but the chief facts she had not disputed. It was evident that she had not been married, and that their money came from an impure source. Then, too, there was the question of Alice. The two women he had been led to believe were the best and purest in the world were both unworthy. It was too horrible! There were moments when he doubted whether he would have the courage to encounter it all, and he began to think that perhaps it would be better to put a bullet into his head than to face the shame which surrounded him, but youth overcame this feeling. It is hard to die at twenty-two when you feel full of life and strength, and so the revolver was put back into its case and Harold determined to pull himself together and make a clean breast of the situation to the Perrys.

He called there the day after his return, and asked to see Mr. Perry alone. The interview was granted him, and he was shown into Mr. Perry's study. It was difficult for him to begin, for his engagement had not

been made public, and yet he did not wish to leave Pencarvon without giving some explanation of his departure.

Mr. Perry was an easy enough man to deal with, and he naturally thought that the object of the young man's visit was to make a formal demand in marriage for his daughter. He was, therefore, very much surprised when Harold began:

"I have come to wish you good-bye, Mr. Perry; I am leaving Pencarvon."

The old man looked up quickly. "Not leaving for ever, I presume? Are you going to travel?"

"I am leaving for ever," answered Harold. "Circumstances have occurred which make it impossible for me to remain here. It is extremely improbable that I shall ever see any of you again."

Then Mr. Perry showed genuine astonishment and he waited for further particulars.

"You must know," continued Harold, "that your daughter Marian has inspired me with the deepest love and affection for her. I may have been wrong, but I spoke to her on the subject and I am sure she will tell you that my love was returned. But when I spoke to her thus, I was under the impression that I had a name and a fortune to offer her. I find now that I have neither, and it is for this reason that I am going away. It is painful for me to explain all this, but I do not

wish any one to be under the impression that I have acted dishonourably."

He was frightfully nervous, as he stammered out the words, and kind-hearted old Mr. Perry felt grievously sorry for him.

"Dear—dear—!" he said. "Has your mother lost money? Has she made unfortunate speculations?"

"My mother is still rich," said Harold, "but I have no right to any of her fortune—and, as I have just told you, I have no name."

"Have you quarrelled with your mother?" said Mr. Perry, still in the dark as to what the young man meant.

"I have not quarrelled with my mother," said Harold, "and I hope I never shall, but she has brought me up in ignorance of the true facts of my birth. My mother has never been married to my father, and I intend henceforth to earn my own living, and not be dependent on the man who has refused me his name."

Then Mr. Perry gave vent to a prolonged whistle—the case was certainly serious. The mystery which had first surrounded Mrs. Maroni, but which her long residence amongst them had almost made them forget, was now cleared up. She had no right to live there as Mrs. Maroni, to foist her children upon them under assumed names. For the moment Mr. Perry felt very angry, and then his sense of justice and Harold's hag-

gard, woe-begone expression, softened him, and he said somewhat kindly:

"I am shocked and disturbed at the news I have just heard, but you have acted very properly in telling me all. I am sure my daughter returns your affection and it will be a blow to her that she can never see you again, but you have acted as a gentleman and a man of honour in letting me know the true facts of the case. Of course a marriage with Marian would be impossible, but you have, nevertheless, my sympathy and I approve of your high-minded motive in wishing to be independent. If I can be of any service to you in finding you employment, Mr. Maroni, I will do so, as I fully appreciate your out-spoken frankness and the manner in which you have behaved."

Harold felt quite ready to break down. Reproaches he could have borne, and he had expected them. Mr. Perry might have been furious at the false pretences under which he had gained admittance into his house. He might even have been rude and blustering, and ordered him out of the house; but instead of this he had spoken kindly and encouragingly, and had even offered him his aid.

Harold turned away and muttered a few words of thanks which his emotion made almost unintelligible. Mr. Perry certainly meant what he said; he was really sorry for the young man, standing nervously there,

plucking at the ribbon of his hat, but he felt that he must give him no hope as to ultimate marriage with Marian. The vast wealth which had been acquired by distilling rum must never pass into the hands of a penniless and nameless youth. He gave him no hope for the future, but at the same time he spoke kindly and exhibited genuine feeling and sympathy.

Then Harold made one last request. Might he see Marian alone, and bid her an eternal farewell?

The old man hesitated—was it of any use? he asked. He should not like Harold to explain the circumstances of the case to his daughter, and how else could he account for his departure.

"I will tell her I am ruined," said Harold, and then bitterly—"God knows I am ruined in every sense of the word, but I should like to see her once again."

Mr. Perry had not the heart to refuse the unhappy young man, and so he reluctantly gave his consent to the proposed interview. In a few minutes he left the room and sent Marian to wish her lover good-bye.

As soon as she entered, she saw that Harold looked serious. Indeed he was quite changed. The laughing youth seemed to have gone from his face, his eyes were dim and his whole manner grave and preoccupied.

"I have come to wish you good-bye," he said,

advancing towards her and holding out his hand, and then with a sad smile, "I am afraid it will be a long farewell—that I shall never see you again."

"My father has told me that you have had some great grief," she answered affectionately—"a grief which I must not know, but that you have acted wisely, and that you have no alternative but to leave."

"Yes, I must leave," he said. "My highest hopes for the future are all shattered, and I must live on the memory of the past. Perhaps," and here he nearly broke down, "you will think of me sometimes—I shall never forget you."

"You know Harold that I love you," she answered. "Why should we be parted? Why should I not go with you? If it is poverty alone which sends you away, I would willingly share it with you. I am not afraid of roughing it, and then papa is generosity itself."

"It is worse than poverty," said Harold. "It is dishonour. Do not ask me any more; I promised your father that I would merely wish you good-bye and I must keep my word."

"And I shall never see you again?" said Marian brokenly.

"Never," answered Harold. "The curse which has fallen upon me will remain for ever."

And then with these few words and some tender embraces the lovers parted.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ALICE'S FUTURE.

IN reply to Mrs. Maroni's letter, Léon de Tesles telegraphed that he would come over at once. He was certainly annoyed at the turn things had taken. From the account she had given him of Kingsborough, he had imagined that, as far as he was concerned, it was merely a question of money, and that as long as the gold was forthcoming he would hold his tongue. De Tesles was, therefore, more than surprised when he received the letter which told him that his lordship was about to do his worst, and had determined to kill the goose with the golden eggs. He felt that it would only be fair that he should take part in the scenes which would ensue. He was still devotedly fond of Helen, and he would defend her to the best of his power, and make her conduct as excusable as he could before her children. Then he had a sudden desire, also, to see these children. Helen had always kept him away from them, and in the careless *insouciance* of his youth he had allowed her to have her own way; but now that they were grown up he was rather

curious, if not anxious, to see the sort of man and woman that she had made of them. He had perfect confidence in her mode of education, he knew that she was a clever woman, possessed of unlimited common sense, and that she had, in addition, an overpowering love for them; still, the curiosity remained, and he was glad of the excuse to join the family party. Upon his arrival he learnt the truth and was much disappointed. Helen had been abused and exposed to her son by the villain Kingsborough, and there remained nothing for him to do but offer feeble words of consolation. He had looked forward to a meeting with his son—that son whom Helen idolized, and whom he knew inherited the handsome features of his mother. He would have liked to have seen him, to have grasped him by the hand and undertaken seriously the rôle of father—a rôle which he had never yet played. For his daughter he did not entertain the same anxiety. He had always held all women in low esteem, and English women in particular, and he scarcely expected that she would differ from the rest of her sex. He had attributed this state of things to the English mode of life, and was of opinion that English education was altogether superior to the French in the case of boys, but utterly deplorable as concerned girls.

“Your boys lead healthy out-of-door lives,” he said, “they are encouraged in manly sports, and become

very different to the emasculated creatures we call men in my country; but with girls it is quite different. English girls are allowed an amount of liberty which is perfectly astounding, and which, nine times out of ten, ends in a catastrophe. There is absolutely no restraint put upon them; they are permitted to do exactly what they please, and when they roam about alone with young men it is euphemistically called 'flirtation.'"

When de Tesles arrived Mrs. Maroni had to tell him of the dreadful scene which had taken place between Harold and Kingsborough. De Tesles' rage knew no bounds; he would have liked there and then to put a bullet through his lordship's head. It was useless, however, to think of violent measures; the man had been played a scurvy trick, and he had chosen his own method of revenge. Mrs. Maroni appealed to Léon for advice and consolation. Harold had spoken vaguely of leaving her for ever, of refusing to live on de Tesles' money. What could she do? She feared he might commit suicide.

De Tesles was inexpressibly shocked, and, moreover, he was surprised. He scarcely realized that there were men in the world who would refuse to eat the bread of shame; at any rate, he had never met with any possessing such high-minded notions, and he could only tell her that time would bring all things right,

and that after she had had a quiet conversation with Harold he would probably see things in a different light. Mrs. Maroni shook her head. She knew Harold better than he did, and she dreaded another interview with him. He had not spoken six words to her after Kingsborough's dreadful revelations, and it was too terrible to think that the model son, who had loved her so dearly, now looked upon her with contempt. She determined, however, to return to Pencarvon, and de Tesles was willing that Alice should pay him a visit. So it was settled; the girl's consent was scarcely asked for, and, indeed, she was quite willing to acquiesce in any arrangement made for her future. She felt her whole life was broken, and she was thankful for any kindness shown to her. When she came into the room and beheld her father she showed not the slightest emotion. She advanced towards him and shook hands, and then relapsed into her former state of listlessness and indifference. De Tesles glanced at her admiringly. She was certainly not so beautiful as her mother had been, but there was a well-bred air about her, and she undoubtedly possessed a charm of manner which none could fail to admire. Her father became at once reconciled to the idea of having her to live with him. After all, he was getting old and did not care to spend whole nights at the club, as he had been in the habit of doing. It would be a pleasant

change to have this young girl to keep house for him, and she would remind him of her mother and of the happy days they had spent together.

There was no question of Lord Kingsborough in the arrangements they made. Alice was to stay with her father until the following spring, and if her husband molested her or threatened her in any way, de Tesles undertook to settle accounts with him, saying that he knew of several little episodes in his past life which would have the desired effect of closing his mouth.

He would not hear of Mrs. Maroni's making him an allowance. "If he appeals to you for money, refer him to me," he said, "and he will get a little more than he bargains for."

It was a relief to Mrs. Maroni to know that Alice, at any rate, was provided for, and that she need have no further anxiety on her account, but there still loomed in the distance the difficulty of Harold's future.

Mrs. Maroni had not felt equal to making any further explanation concerning Kingsborough's revelations before he left London. She had said that all was not true, that her son must hear her version, but the words were not forthcoming by which she was to exculpate herself, and Harold had given her no encouragement to proceed. It was against all laws that a mother should have to defend herself to her son, and this they both felt.

Harold was anxious to save his mother any further pain, and Mrs. Maroni had still a remnant of pride which made it distasteful to her to make excuses for a whole life composed of deceit and untruth. Still, she would not allow him to leave her without making every effort, not only to prevent his doing so, but also to justify herself in some sort of way, for having persistently kept her children in ignorance of their parentage. It was with a heavy heart that she bade Alice and de Tesles farewell, and that she looked forward to another meeting with her son. What would happen if Harold persisted in his intention of leaving home and refusing to accept de Tesles' money? She must leave Cornwall, and go Heaven knows where! She must end her days, as she had once said to Kingsborough, at a roulette table or in the gutter.

Her children were completely alienated from her. Alice had been as cold to her as it was possible for a daughter to be, and Harold talked of leaving her for ever. Perhaps her darling son would relent. He might be more lenient to her when he knew all the circumstances of the case, and heard that de Tesles had a wife—a fact which was the sole cause of his not having legitimised his children. It was a faint hope, but she dwelt on it during the long and dreary journey to Cornwall, and by the time she reached Pencarvon the pleasure of seeing Harold again and this same faint

hope gave her better spirits and more courage with which to encounter the ordeal.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MOTHER AND SON.

WHEN Mrs. Maroni arrived at "The House" she was informed at once by Mrs. James that "Master Harold," as the old nurse continued to call him, was on the point of leaving. He had been making all his preparations for departure, and his mother had only just arrived in time to see him.

Mrs. Maroni told her faithful housekeeper of the scene that had taken place in London. Of course the old woman who had nursed Alice and Harold was bound to know the truth. Mrs. James took as great an interest in the family as if it was her own, and loved the two children with a mother's love. She literally gasped with horror when Mrs. Maroni told her that Lord Kingsborough had divulged the story of her mistress's early life.

"It is all over now," moaned Mrs. Maroni, pleased to have this sympathetic old woman to talk to. "The work of years has been undone by a few words from his slanderous tongue." And she proceeded to tell Mrs. James exactly how things had happened. When she

came to the point where Harold had sprung upon Kingsborough and almost throttled him, Mrs. James's eyes gleamed with fire, and she said:

"You should have let him do it; you shouldn't have separated them. The cur deserved a good thrashing."

But Mrs. Maroni shook her head. Violent measures were of no use, and the mischief was then done. She told Mrs. James of the efforts she intended to make to prevent Harold from leaving her, and she begged that she, too, would use her influence. He was fond of his old nurse, who could say more in favour of his mother than could Mrs. Maroni herself. Mrs. James promised her warmest aid. She was confident that Master Harold would listen to her, as he had often done when a boy and she had felt it necessary to lecture him with sound advice. She forgot that Harold was a man now and possessed a man's feelings about honour, and especially the honour of his mother. Still, her words comforted Mrs. Maroni, and she went forth to seek Harold in rather an easier state of mind than she had enjoyed for the last few days.

She found her son in the library arranging books on the shelves, and he scarcely looked up as she entered the room.

Mrs. Maroni went straight at the point. It was no use whatever to beat about the bush and talk conventionally when there was such a grave issue at hand.

"Nannie tells me you are leaving, dear," she said. "Where are you going?"

"I have not decided yet," he said gloomily. "I suppose I shall go to London."

Then Mrs. Maroni went up to him, and laying her hand on his shoulder, she said with tears in her voice:

"Harold, it will be very cruel if you leave me. I may have done wrong to have kept you in the dark as to my past, but you surely cannot forget how I have loved you, or how my whole life since I came here has been devoted to my children."

"I do not blame you, mother," he answered. "It is not for me to judge you, but, all the same, I cannot remain here."

"You need not remain here," she said. "We can leave together; we can go abroad—anywhere; but do not desert me altogether." There was a piteous wail in her voice as she uttered these last words.

"I have no right to live on your money," he said, "I must earn my own living, and no longer be dependent on that man."

"He is your father," said Mrs. Maroni; "who should have a better right to his money than you?"

"My father!" said Harold bitterly, "a man who refuses me his name and who has dishonoured you! I would rather not speak of him. Besides, my mind is quite made up—nothing you can say will alter me."

"It is not his fault that you are nameless," said Mrs. Maroni. "He would have married me years ago had he not had a wife."

"And you have been content to usurp that wife's place, and bring us up on money that was rightly hers. Oh! mother, I cannot believe it of you," he said, turning away from her.

Mrs. Maroni felt the reproach acutely. She hurriedly began her defence. Of course she had not known of de Tesles' wife when first she met him; she had honestly believed that he would marry her, and it was only when it was too late that she found out that she had been betrayed. "I suffered cruelly then," she said. "I should have been abandoned by every one. What could I do but remain with the man with whom I had left Cairo."

"Anything would have been better than that," answered Harold, "a life of hard work, or even death, would have been better than that."

"I see it now," she said, "but it is too late."

"Yes, it is too late," said Harold, and there was not a shade of pity or feeling in his voice. "We have all of us been forced into leading lives of deceit," he continued. "I sought the love of an innocent girl who looked upon me as a gentleman and a man in every way worthy of her, and I have had to bow my head in shame; to tell her father that I am a bastard, and

that I have no right to the money I have all my life enjoyed."

Mrs. Maroni winced.

"Have you told them that?" she said.

"I was obliged to tell them," he answered. "I told Mr. Perry that I was leaving Pencarvon for ever, and I was bound to give him my reasons for doing so."

There was a long pause, and then Mrs. Maroni burst out crying and said:

"Oh! Harold, have you no pity for me? Is your love for me really dead? Think how I have loved you—you who have been my idol for twenty years. I cannot let you go without you say one kind word to me."

"You have been an excellent mother, I know," he said, "but your kindness has been cruel. Your secret was bound to be discovered some day, and it would have been better to bring us up as the waifs and strays we were than to place us in a fool's paradise—better, perhaps, if you had neglected us altogether."

"Ah! no, Harold, do not say that," sobbed Mrs. Maroni, "surely you cannot be ungrateful for the years of devotion I have given you. I never thought to hear you, my idolized son, say that he would be thankful if he had never known his mother!"

Harold did not answer, and then Mrs. Maroni proceeded:

"Yes, it would have been better. You are right," she said. "I have seen women in my position who brought up their children to despise every one, to hate the world and to live only for their own ends; to laugh at honour and all fine feelings. Those women were right. At any rate, their children had no illusions, and probably loved their mothers better than you love me now. I was wrong to make you believe in honour and rectitude. The result is that you despise me and that you say things which cut me like a knife."

"It has all been a mistake," said Harold. "I dare say you acted for the best, only we shall never agree on the subject. I must leave you, mother, and I must try and forget my past life."

"What will become of me?" said Mrs. Maroni, "abandoned by my children, what will become of me?"

"You will have Alice," said Harold. "I am afraid she does not entertain the same feelings that I do."

"It is not Alice I want," said Mrs. Maroni, "it is you, Harold; you, my darling son, in whom I have always taken such a pride. God grant that you may never know the torture I am undergoing now. Nothing can be so cruel as unkindness from a child. A mother's love is different to all else—you do not know the world as I do—it is the one feeling which overcomes all

others. Harold! Harold! do not leave me. Say one kind word, try and find some excuse for me."

"I can find none," said Harold in a hard, cold voice.

"You must do so,"—continued Mrs. Maroni between her sobs—"think of the past; go back to your childhood. Have I ever denied you anything? Have I ever thwarted your slightest wish? Was I not always a loving companion to you? Did I not always take an interest in all your pleasures and your work? Do not let my reward be to see you turn from me with contempt."

"We shall be better apart," answered Harold. "I will write to you sometimes, but you are no longer the mother that I have all my life looked upon as the best and noblest of women."

Mrs. Maroni gave one despairing cry and sank on to a sofa. It was all useless, she felt; her punishment was complete. She had tried all she knew to soften him, but his heart was adamant and he would not listen to her. Henceforth she was nothing to him, for she must either go back to the old life of dissipation and pleasure or eat her heart out in vain regrets for her lost son.

"What shall you do?" she said presently, looking up at him with tear-stained face.

"I shall enlist," was Harold's curt reply.

"Enlist!" ejaculated Mrs. Maroni.

"Yes," he answered. "Mr. Perry offered to find me some employment, but I shall not avail myself of his kindness. I feel I have no right to accept anything from anybody. I must cut out my own career, and in my present mood a soldier's life is the one which pleases me most."

"Why should you enlist?" said Mrs. Maroni eagerly. "You could easily pass the examination, and you are not beyond the age for entering the army."

"One must have an income to be an officer," he said, "and I have none."

Then she attempted to persuade him from this idea, and spoke even more pleadingly than she had done before, but Harold was obdurate and would not listen to her. His mind was made up; he was going to leave for London that day, and he would enlist as soon as possible.

Then Mrs. Maroni rose and steadied herself at the table. His last words, hard and unrelenting, had shown how firm he was, and how useless it was for her to persevere in her endeavour to make him remain.

"I have said all I can, Harold," she began in a trembling voice. "May you never regret the action you are taking to-day, and may you never know how you have made me suffer."

"I have done so unintentionally," he said. "It is useless to prolong the discussion."

"Yes, it is useless," said Mrs. Maroni, keeping back her tears. "I see your mind is made up. I will only ask God to bless you and direct your footsteps in the right path."

Then he advanced towards her, and in a kinder voice he said:

"Good-bye, mother."

Mrs. Maroni did not answer; she was choking, and the tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"I don't suppose we shall meet again," he continued, "but if ever I earn a name for myself, and feel that I can hold up my head, we may do so."

"We shall never meet again," said Mrs. Maroni mechanically.

Then he kissed her on the forehead, and Mrs. Maroni flung her arms wildly round his neck, and as he disengaged himself from her embrace she only murmured, "We shall never meet again."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHERE THE WEARY ARE AT REST.

WHEN Harold left his mother with her wailing cry still in his ears—"We shall never meet again," he proceeded to his room and packed up just the few necessities that he would require to exist in London until he had fulfilled his intention of enlisting. Mrs. Maroni remained in the library and was discovered there an hour later by Mrs. James. She told the old housekeeper all that happened—the inflexibility of Harold and his determination to leave Pencarvon, and Mrs. James was horrified. She had never foreseen such a terrible end of this tranquil life. She thought the days for scenes and reproaches were over when Helen left M. de Tesles and came to reside in Cornwall. In her ignorant old mind she could scarcely grasp the fact that Harold refused to live on his father's money and had spoken unkindly to his mother. It seemed impossible to her that the life which had gone on so calmly for fifteen years should all at once be broken up, and that Mrs. Maroni should stand there before her a ruined and heart-broken woman. She tried her best

to console her mistress. She told her that Harold would think better of his determination—he was a high-spirited young man, and he was acting simply on impulse, but she knew he loved his mother, and it would not be long before he proved it. But Mrs. Maroni knew better. The poor lady remembered all her son's bitter speeches, in which he had not attempted to spare her. Indeed, he would not even hear her defence. He must go his own way, and she must realize the fact that his love for her was dead and gone. They sat there, these two women, Mrs. Maroni hopeless and despairing, and "Nannie" doing her best to console her. The old nurse was very bitter against Harold, and thought he had behaved badly, but Mrs. Maroni would not hear a word against him. "It is all my fault," she declared; "Harold is in no way to blame."

She knew that it would be useless to see him before he left, and she went to her room with heavy, weary footsteps, and sat herself down to think. She had said to him—"What will become of me?" and the thought again recurred to her. Her life was done with—her presence was hateful to her son, and he had told her so in as many words. What was there in life that she could look forward to? Nothing. She was calm now, the passion of the morning had left her, and she could look quietly at the future. All was dark and forbidding. There did not appear a gleam of light in

her horizon. She sat in her room with her head supported by her two hands, and as all she had gone through during the last few days recurred to her, she exclaimed aloud: "I wonder I am not mad;" and then came the thought of death—a quiet, painless death which would carry her far beyond this world and all its troubles, and which would be her expiation. She never shuddered as she thought of putting an end to a life which as yet was but half achieved. Death would liberate her from the stigma which was attached to her name, and it would give her peace in another world. She had some laudanum in an old bottle stored away in a cupboard. One drink at the fatal contents of this bottle and all would be over. Her son would no longer have her there as a reproach, and her martyrdom would be over. She walked to the cupboard and took the bottle from its shelf. It was half-full—there was more than enough to kill her, and she looked at it longingly, as if it contained a happy release to all her trouble. Harold would be shocked when he heard of her death, but it would be a relief to him. He would perhaps regret his harshness, the unforgiving words he had spoken to her, but it were better thus—he would know then how she had loved him, and that she had preferred death to living without his love. She grasped the phial almost lovingly; it seemed to her to contain so many comforting elements; and the thought occurred

to her that she would write him a few farewell words of unutterable love and forgiveness.

She sat down at the writing table and placed the laudanum by her side, and in a firm hand she wrote as follows:

“MY DARLING BOY—

“When I said that we should never meet again, I had no idea that my words would come so quickly true. You spoke harshly to me this morning, dear, and I am too weak and ill to forget your words. They have entered my very heart and taken all life out of me. You did not mean to be unkind, dear, and you did not know the pain you caused me when you said, ‘I should have done better to have neglected you altogether,’—but I feel the cruelty of what you said, and it is more than I can bear. I am going to die, darling Harold; I am about to face my Maker and ask His forgiveness for the sins you judged so harshly. It is the only expiation in my power, and I trust that when I am removed from this earth you will be happier and be able to start afresh in life. It is no sacrifice that I am making, for I feel that I have nothing left worth living for. My life has not been a happy one, and now that you are lost to me, I do not regret putting an end to it. I feel how wrongly I acted in keeping from you the secret of your birth, but I assure you I did it for

the best. There is one more thing I should like to say before I wish you good-bye for ever, and it concerns Lord Kingsborough's accusations against me. He said I lived a life of vicious indulgence until I was satiated with it, and then I took you to the country. This is not true. I lived with M. de Tesles a life of misery. He will tell you so himself. There were no days on which I did not reproach him for the deceit he had practised upon me, and it was when I could bear that existence no longer, that I determined to leave him. That I was wrong to do so I now see—I should have remained with him and brought you up in haphazard fashion. This is the lesson of the world, and the lesson that you taught me this morning. But, as I can, at least, wipe out my evil life by death, I have chosen to do so, and I do not now regret that I have done my best to make you a gentleman, and that I leave behind me a son who is in every respect a worthy and honourable man. The curse of my existence has, through my own selfishness on your behalf, fallen on your sister, and it is a proof that the sins of the parents shall be visited upon the children. I will not tire you by writing any more. Try to forget the events of the last few days; think only of me, darling Harold, as the mother who loved you more than her life; think of the happy days we have spent together, of my tender care of you during childhood, of my increasing pride as you grew

up to manhood, and then forget the double life I have led, and say a few kind words of forgiveness over my grave."

The poor heart-broken woman who wrote these lines did not once read them over when she had finished writing. She sat there, pen in hand, gazing absently at the bottle of poison before her, and seemingly unable to move. Harold would be sorry, she thought, when he heard of her death, but it would relieve him of her reproachful presence, and in her excited, over-wrought condition she considered she was doing right. Presently she rose from her seat, and passing into her dressing-room, she changed her dress for a long, white flowing robe, and then she walked quietly up to the table, and having placed her letter in an envelope, she addressed it to her son. Then she took up the bottle of laudanum, and still it did not inspire her with any horror. She poured some out in a glass, nearly all the bottle contained, and then laid herself down on the sofa and drank it off at a draught. "God be merciful to me a miserable sinner," she said as she closed her eyes in her last sleep.

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A few hours later Mrs. James, bringing her some tea, discovered her thus. Her hands were crossed on her bosom, and the handsome features were statue-like

in their severe beauty of outline. Death had not ravaged her, she seemed to be only sleeping, but Mrs. James saw the empty bottle by her side, and she knew at once that her well-loved mistress had sought for forgiveness in another world.

The housekeeper ran at once for Harold, and found him on the point of leaving the house. The old woman's grief knew no bounds, and she was angry with Harold for being, as she considered, the cause of his mother's death.

"Come and see your work," she screamed at him. "Come and see the mother you have killed."

Then Harold rushed to his mother's room, and saw at once what had happened. He feverishly tore open her letter and read her last despairing words, and then he flung himself on his knees by her side, and prayed aloud that he also might be taken.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE WAY OF TRANSGRESSORS.

A FEW days later Helen de Tesles was lying peacefully at rest under the shadow of the yew trees in the quiet Cornish churchyard. Meantime, Harold had obtained from Mrs. James full particulars as to his mother's past life. As soon as the funeral was over, he received a visit from his mother's lawyer, and ascertained from that gentleman that he was worth something like fifty thousand pounds. His mind, as we have seen, was made up the moment he learnt from Lord Kingsborough the real position of affairs, and he now saw no reason to alter his resolution. The young man converted everything into money with the exception of his mother's jewels, and these, together with the large fortune he had inherited, he sent to his father. To M. de Tesles he wrote:

"Much as I cherish and venerate the memory of my much-wronged mother, I have no intention of retaining money that originally came from such hands as yours. I am not lost to all feelings of honour although

I am your son. Keep the money to gild the cage of some other victim."

To his sister he wrote:

"You must, of course, decide for yourself, but I cannot help saying that if I were you I would give up every farthing that had come to me from my father, and try to earn my bread by honest work. Were I you, I would sooner drudge as a nursery governess than remain under the roof of the man who ruined your mother's life."

Within a week later, Harold made his way to the cavalry dépôt at Canterbury, and there enlisted in the 90th Hussars. He found the work very hard and uncongenial, but he faced his troubles and difficulties boldly, and, thanks to the kindness of the captain of his troop, who quickly saw of what mettle the young man was made, and took a great fancy to him, he was spared many of the annoyances that encompass the path of the recruit. In a few months' time Harold passed his drill, and was just going out with the draft to India, when a chance arose for volunteering for the Camel Corps about to be sent out to the Soudan. It is needless to say that he embraced with eagerness this opportunity of distinguishing himself. He proved

an excellent soldier, and after quickly passing through the intermediate grades was promoted to the rank of sergeant. Then, one day, his great chance came. An officer of Lancers had had his horse shot under him, and was surrounded by Soudanese thirsting for his blood. Harold, catching hold of a stray horse, galloped to the rescue, and although badly wounded himself, managed to get the officer out of action. For this gallant deed the general commanding the division recommended him for the Victoria Cross, and when he returned home after the campaign he was further rewarded by the gift of a commission.

Now all this time Marian Perry had been pining after her lover, and had at length become seriously ill. From the moment that Harold had bidden her farewell she had implored her father to recall him, and the old gentleman, who had all along felt inclined to yield, found in young Maroni's brilliant achievements a very fitting opportunity of doing so. He, therefore, promised his daughter that she should have her way, and added that he would receive her lover as his son. Mr. Perry lost no time in writing to Harold as follows:

"DEAR MR. MARONI,

"I hope you will permit an old friend and sincere well-wisher to congratulate you upon your brilliant success. At our last interview I formed an exceedingly

high opinion of you and looked upon your conduct as the most honourable and upright that I had ever met with. At the same time I frankly admit that I did not encourage your union with my daughter, and was shortsighted enough to accept without demur your suggestion that such an alliance was, under all the circumstances, out of the question.

“Let me ask your pardon for my stupidity, and plead in extenuation that your communication came upon me so suddenly that I was scarcely competent on the spur of the moment to come to a wise and proper conclusion.

“I now beg you to honour my family by consenting to become one of its members. Marian is longing to hear from you, and still more longs to see you. Let your reply—and let me hope a quick reply—be sent to her and comfort her heart and delight mine.

“I will trouble you no more than by saying that the greatest pride of my life will be upon the day that you will become my son-in-law, if, indeed, you will so honour me.

“Most truly yours,

“MATTHEW PERRY.”

It would be easy to guess Harold's reply to this kindly letter. The young soldier answered it in person, and in a few weeks Marian and he were married.

Alice Kingsborough still remains with her father. It is scarcely to be wondered at that she was unable to adopt her brother's advice. It is given to few of us to take such a high-minded course as Harold Maroni felt compelled to take, and poor Alice may well be forgiven if she did not possess enough strength of character to follow her brother's example. M. de Tesles lavishes upon her every luxury; his daughter is his first consideration, and it is only fair to say that he does all in his power to make Alice's life a peaceful and contented one.

Madame de Tesles has lately died, and Léon de Tesles has performed the scant justice of legitimating his children, as by French law allowed. Alice, who gave birth to a son, which bears Kingston's name, lavishes upon the little fellow all the care and devotion that a fond mother is capable of. The boy is her one consolation, and indeed she lives for nothing else.

Harold has always refused to see his father. "I do not blame him," said Léon de Tesles one day, speaking to his daughter on the subject, "My conduct was unjustifiable viewed from any standpoint possible—utterly unjustifiable. And my greatest punishment is that the son I am proud of and long to embrace, with a longing I have never known, refuses to re-

cognize my existence. The cup has come to my lips at last and I suppose that I must drink it to the very dregs."

It may be doubted whether any man ever so utterly regretted an act of his life as did Lord Kingsborough, when he came to consider calmly the revenge he had taken on Mrs. Maroni. He found himself in a most ridiculous position and at the same time utterly penniless. At his wits' end he wrote to Léon de Tesles for assistance. He said that he had taken legal advice, and had ascertained that Alice's marriage with Kingston was perfectly valid; and, that being so, it was quite clear that he could, if he chose, successfully maintain a suit for nullity of marriage, on the ground of his wife's wilful misdescription of herself, and unless M. de Tesles consented to allow him a handsome income he should at once file a petition.

Alice's father treated this letter with the contempt that it deserved. "You can take any course you think proper," he said. "I, for my part, can only regret that the frenzy of a woman driven to the verge of madness by your dastardly threats has been the cause of my daughter having associated her name with yours. She and I will be thankful to the law if it enables her to rid herself of a name borne by and derived from such a rascal as yourself.

"As for your impudent demand for money, I would

not give you a frank to save you from the starvation you so justly merit. Never have the audacity to address me again."

Lord Kingsborough did not go to law. The fact is that he had no money, and, curiously enough, solicitors are, as a rule, disinclined to embark in expensive litigation on behalf of a client unless they can see the prospect of getting some money either at present or in the future out of somebody's pocket. No such vision presented itself on this occasion, and three firms of solicitors whom Lord Kingsborough consulted—Messrs. Proudfoot and Dawdle, Messrs. Sharp, Quicksetter, Blazer and Sharp, and Messrs. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—declined in more or less polite terms to have anything to do with the affair.

It was not a bright look-out for Lord Kingsborough, and that nobleman fully realized the painful fact. The downward path of such a man is very rapid. He succeeded, upon the strength of his title, in getting credit from a few confiding tradespeople, but these folk speedily discovered what sort of customer they had to deal with, and declined the honour of his further patronage.

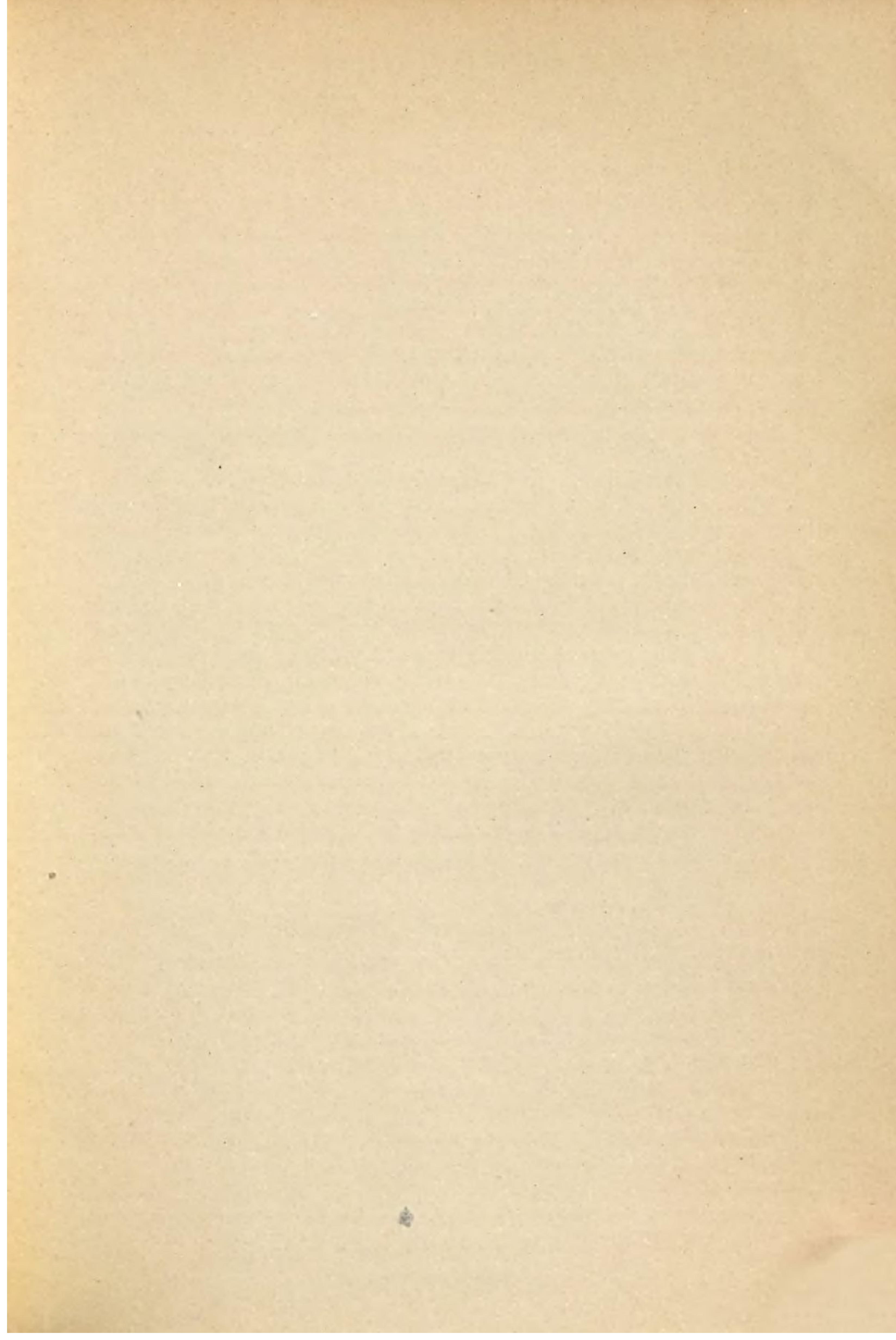
At last, being reduced to the direst straits, he bethought himself of his old friend Mrs. Potter, and to Clan William Terrace he accordingly directed his steps. But here again he was doomed to meet with disap-

pointment. Mrs. Potter, who in the meantime had consoled herself with a stalwart undertaker—a gentleman who looked as if he would stand no nonsense—received him with the utmost coldness, and, after having been called upon to answer some searching and unpleasant questions on the part of the twins, and to put up with a good deal of gruff familiarity from Mr. Winder—Mrs. Potter's present partner—he thought it best to beat a retreat.

Lord Kingsborough's future is not hard to predict. He has taken to drink. It is astonishing how men circumstanced as he find money with which to buy brandy, but, anyhow, it is the fact that they are rarely without the means to gratify their terrible craving. Delirium tremens and the drunkard's death seem all that are in store for one who so strikingly exemplifies in his own person the truth of the proverb that "the way of transgressors is hard."

THE END.

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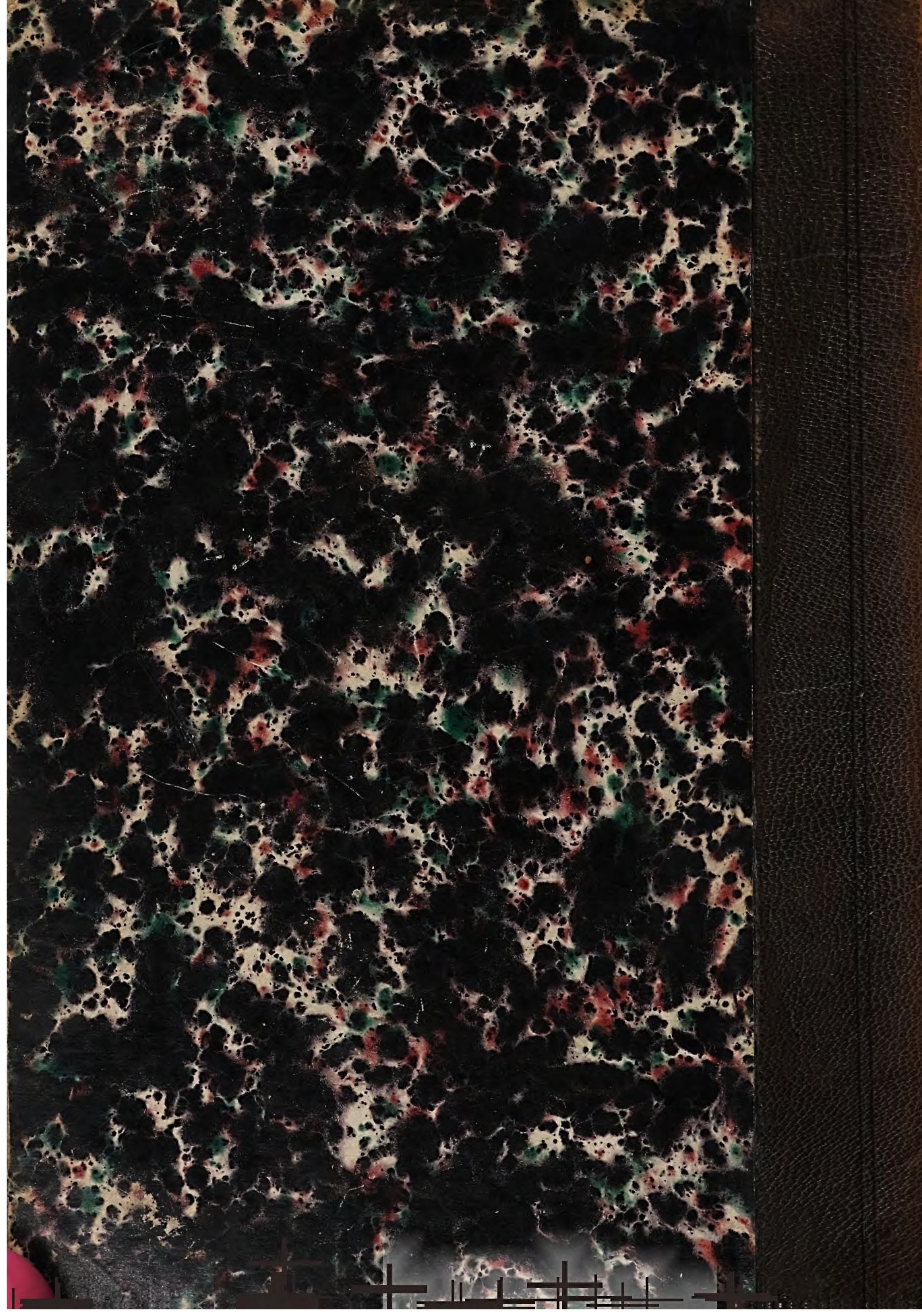
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